



BHANTE BODHIDHAMMA

**ENCOURAGEMENTS
TOWARDS
AWAKENING**

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1-T Jalan Gottlieb
10350 Penang, Malaysia
Tel & Fax: 604-2294811
Email: shpg@sukhihotu.com

D9-6-1, Block D9, Jalan PJU 1A/46
Dana 1 Commercial Centre
(Off Jalan Lapangan Terbang Subang)
47301 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel & Fax: 603-7842 6828
Email: shpj@sukhihotu.com

By arrangement with
Satipanya Buddhist Retreat
White Grit, Minsterly
Shropshire, SY5 OJN
United Kingdom
Tel: 0044 (0) 1588 650752
Email: manager@satipanya.org.uk
www.satipanya.org.uk

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Preface

When I run Mahasi retreats, I tend to give a short talk in the morning. In autumn 2004, I was invited to teach for two months at the Forest Refuge, in Mass, USA. I gave little pointers in the morning and then wrote them up. Five years on, they have matured into this collection.

These 'Encouragements' will hopefully be of use to people on retreat, especially a long retreat. Several pieces would also be good reminders in daily practice.

Many thanks to meditators who have read these pieces and special thanks to Ashin U Ottama and Ven. Ariyanyani, Noirin Sheahan and Marjo Oosterhoff for reading the script, all of whom gave me valuable feedback. And last, but by no means least, Therese Caherty who edited the work and helped me clarify the writing.

Should you, the present reader, also wish to give feedback, especially where you think I may be mistaken or unclear, please do so. And since this is by no means an exhaustive list, if you see a topic I haven't covered, again please email me - bodhidhamma@satipanya.org.uk

With thanks.

*I trust you will find these pieces of some benefit.
May you attain liberation sooner rather than later!*

Bhante Bodhidhamma
Satipanya
01 Jan 2010

Introduction

In these essays, aimed at the general reader and meditator, I felt it necessary to introduce some Pali words. Translations may often contain inaccuracies since cultures see things differently. Also, individual writers / translators can use different words for the same foreign word. All of which can lead to confusion!

For example, translating *dukkha* (variously read as suffering, unsatisfactoriness, stress) is problematic since its meaning includes the suffering that arises out of indulgence and attachment. I tend to use all at different times.

Citta (pronounced chitta) is mostly translated as mind, but also heart-mind. This is because unlike the English word mind (generally confined to intellect and imagination), citta includes our emotional life. The old word soul, the Latin *animus* and the Greek *psyche* encompass this combined meaning but, of course, are loaded with Western traditions. Rather than use the clumsy 'heart-mind', here I use the citta by which I mean the whole complex of thought, imagination, moods and emotions as opposed to the body where the citta knows only sensations. So in this instance, 'mind' refers to that which perceives, thinks and knows. 'Heart' refers to the emotional, mood life. And where I use 'citta' I mean both.

Then there is *vedana* – or feeling. The Buddha talks of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral physical and mental feelings. And the English word feeling just about covers all of this in that we talk of feeling angry or feeling unwell. We have to understand, though, that it is the citta that perceives, feels and knows. The body as such 'knows' nothing. In this sense all vedana are mental.

I have not highlighted Pali words so that they sit as part of the text. They are also spelt phonetically for easy reading but you may find their dictionary spelling in the glossary.

Finally, in the pure vipassana path of insight, *jhana*, the absorption into various levels of ecstatic states, is avoided. The Mahasi Sayadaw taught in the tradition of the Satipatthana Sutta, *The Discourse on How to Establish Right Awareness*, often referred to as the ‘jewel of the collection’, which begins with the words, *ekayano maggo*, ‘This is the direct path ...’

I think it is important that lay practitioners in particular know that this was taught to the ordinary folk of Kurusaddhamma, who were too busy to find the time to develop the jhana. For further clarification about the jhana and how they appear in vipassana see my essay, ‘Vipassana as taught by the Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma’.

Some basic reading:

- *Practical Vipassana Exercises* by the Mahasi Sayadaw is the best basic introduction.
- *In This Very Life* by Sayadaw U Pandita remains the classic for those practising in the Mahasi method.
- *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* by Nyanaponika Thera is also the classic introduction to vipassana.



Dedication

To all my students
Whose enthusiasm has been my inspiration
Whose questions have been goads to study

Grateful thanks.

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Glossary: Pali words with diacritics





THE
BASICS





1. Aims And Objectives

When I trained to be a teacher, I was taught to differentiate aims from objectives. Aims were those distant objectives one hoped students might achieve and objectives were their immediate goals. This holds for most of our aspirations in life, whether it's a skill, a profession or relationship - or, in our case, spiritual aspiration.

When we come into a retreat situation or start our daily practice, naturally we want to have some psychological benefit, even physical benefits and assuredly to make spiritual headway. But if these become our objectives rather than our aims then we load the present moment with goals that cannot be achieved. And they cannot be achieved because it's that old rascal, the self, that wants to achieve. It is one thing to go to a doctor for a cure or to a counsellor or therapist for help, but when we try to medicate ourselves, or worse psychoanalyse ourselves, then we are in dangerous waters. Spiritually, it's a disaster to try to achieve anything because the whole definition of a spiritual goal is that it is outside the realm of self, beyond the power of self.

Our immediate objectives, therefore, cannot be the same as our long-term aims. And here is where the Buddha shows his genius as a teacher. Indeed our aim is to achieve liberation from all psychological suffering and unsatisfactoriness and to experience Nibbana. But to get to those ends, we need to establish Right Awareness. That's our immediate objective.

Think of an archer. When they point towards the target, it is never at the bullseye itself, but at some imaginary point in the air. They know if the arrow passes through that point at the right speed, it will surely hit bullseye. It is the same in our practice. If we make our sole objective the establishment of moment-to-moment attentiveness, then as surely as that arrow, we shall be heading towards the end of suffering and the experience of the deathless, Nibbana.

Now such is our nature we will unwittingly try to achieve the impossible. That's why it is so important to reflect on what we are doing. And what we are doing is simply honing the skills of meditation. Just as the archer must practise and practise until they become perfect, so we in our meditation, must

practise and practise so that mindfulness becomes more and more our second nature. Never mind second nature - first nature!

A recurring phrase in the Buddha's Discourses is *yoniso manasikara*, meaning to reflect wisely. There is nothing wrong, indeed it is very skilful, to stop every so often in the sitting and remind ourselves of our task, especially so when the Hindrances seem to be getting the better of us. For instance, if the mind is forever wandering, then stop. Reflect on why this is happening. Are we doing all we can? Is what we are doing skilful? It may just be that the mind is restless and we must patiently bring it back to mindfulness. And so on.

So let us be clear about our present objectives. Our work is to hone the skills of meditation and establish moment-to-moment awareness. Let us rest in the faith that such distant aims as final liberation will arise as a matter of course. In this way, our practice is greatly simplified and, perhaps more importantly, greatly clarified. Indeed all that is necessary for all our spiritual aspirations to manifest is to watch, to observe, to experience fully every event that arises and passes away within the focus of our attention.





2. Confidence And The Refuges

Confidence is a spiritual faculty, the absolutely necessary first step to spiritual practice. The word *saddha* is often translated as faith but becomes confused with belief. Confidence tells us that we trust. When we see a doctor for diagnosis and medicine there is an implicit trust, a confidence in their ability. If not, we will probably go elsewhere and certainly not take the medicine until we have another test. And this is why confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is a prerequisite, for without trust we simply won't do the practice.

This confidence is gained first through knowing the teaching. Newcomers want to know what they are letting themselves in for and ask early on: 'What is vipassana? What does it do? What's the reasoning behind it?' That we are now sitting means we have got beyond that stage and have the confidence to try it out. Even so it is good practice to 'take the Refuges'.

Taking refuge in the Buddha is a declaration that you trust him as a spiritual teacher and that at least for the purpose of this retreat you will put aside any doubts. But it has a deeper significance also because the Buddha is not only the teacher and exemplar, but also an archetype. There is that within is that also seeks liberation. We also take refuge in the 'Buddha within'.

The Dhamma is the teaching which includes all the development after the Buddha's passing into parinibbana, total Nibbana, which are in accord with his teaching. Here it is the practice and teachings on this particular retreat. By putting our confidence in the present teacher and teaching we can allay any doubts. Allow ourselves to do the course and then when it's completed we can reflect on that experience. Not that we need to close down our critical faculties on retreat, more that we don't let a sceptical doubt undermine our confidence. Usually all doubts are dealt with in the interview with the teacher.

The greatest lack of confidence often arises towards ourselves. This can be because we expected a result that has not come about. It can arise because we are comparing ourselves with others. Both lead to deep pits. It's good to remind ourselves in such times that each of us has our path and we will accomplish our liberation in our own time. That's the Buddhadhamma.

The Sangha is the community of those who have entered into the paths and fruits, the Noble Ones. They are witness to the Buddha's teachings by their own personal experience of the various levels of awakening. This is not to be confused with the ordained sangha.

Taking the Refuges does not make you a 'Buddhist'. To become a follower of the Buddha is a deeper commitment in the heart. It is if and when a person comes to accept the Buddhadhamma as the primary source of spiritual life. It is the point where everything in their lives has to fit in with that central commitment. In the early days Buddhists called themselves *sadhammika* – followers of the true law.

In this way you can take the 'refuge in the triple gem' for whatever length of time you determine. Eventually, you may want to make it a full year to see how it feels when you commit yourself to this path wholeheartedly.

Bowing, taking the Refuges and the training rules is a small ceremony that can even be done privately and which sets the heart in the right mode. It's an entrance, a gate which then opens out into our retreat. And in the same way to take this into daily practice, to start the day with these commitments and intentions will also have its wholesome effects throughout the day.





3. Sila: Training Rules

When I travelled to the east and started Buddhist practice in the seventies, there was still a hippie atmosphere and it was all 'love'.

The Dhamma offered an exciting exploration of meditation and occasional talk of morality. Morality! We'd all had enough that. We just wanted the enlightenment, thank you very much. Unfortunately I don't ever remember morality being explained. It was presented more like the Ten Commandments. But in fact the translation of sikkhapada is footsteps of training.

The Five Training Rules are:

- *not to take the life of any living being*
- *not to take what is not freely given*
- *not to misuse our sexual energy*
- *not to speak untruths*
- *not to take drink or drugs that cloud the mind.*

Most of us have no problem with these as guidelines for an ethical life, though the advice on sexual behaviour and alcohol and drugs is not what we really want to hear. But to divorce our ethical life from the process of liberation is a profound error.

The growth of insight and wisdom and the development of a moral and virtuous life depend on each other for advancement. Not to realise this is not to have understood Dependent Origination, the Law of Karma and the Eightfold Path.

Our everyday life runs on the basis of ignorance which manifests in our attitudes of acquisitiveness and aversion. Our ethical life is a measure of our wisdom or lack of it. And this is stated as the first two steps of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right Understanding manifests as right attitude. Right Attitude will reinforce and deepen our right understanding.

When this Right Understanding and Attitude move out into the world they manifest in right speech, right action and right livelihood.

The ethical life is expressed in the definition of Right Attitude as a move from selfishness to generosity, from hatred to love and from cruelty to compassion. But take any unwholesome trait and its transformation into the opposite is the purpose of developing Right Attitude.

So when we start a retreat it is always good practice to purify the heart of any unwholesome residue of past unwholesome action. This calls for an examination of our behaviour, an expression of remorse and determination to make reparation where possible.

Then we set a firm resolution to behave absolutely ethically throughout the retreat. So taking the Five Training Rules is a prerequisite of any retreat.

Observing the further three rules of the anagarika can strengthen this resolve. This is often called a lay ordination and brings lay people into harmony with monastics when they stay at a monastery.

The rules are:

- *not to eat after the midday meal*
- *not to sleep on high and luxurious beds (not to indulge in sleep!)*
- *not to indulge in entertainment or self-beautification.*

These training rules allow our energies to be centred on the task in hand. They also create a protective shield around the basic five moral training rules. Together, these eight rules are taken after the Refuges and put one in the right frame of mind and heart.

Because our ethical behaviour is a measure of our wisdom and also deepens our wisdom, we obviously have to take these basic training rules with us into daily life.

Even the three more monastic ones can be used to act as restraints. For example, we may limit ourselves to one good meal, or perhaps more realistically to just three good meals without the in-between grazing. We may sleep only when we know we need it and not use sleep as an escape. We may be careful what we put into the citta and make our entertainment wholesome. We may choose to limit our compulsion to follow fashion and depend on retail therapy for relief.

There can be no final liberation without the utter purification of the heart. When we begin a retreat or any day by confessing to ourselves our shortcomings, by making apology and firm commitment to ethical behaviour we set our spiritual work on a firm foundation. We won't get very far if we build on sand. And we need also to remind ourselves of our goodness. We have developed our sila and in that we should have confidence and congratulate ourselves.



4. Bowing

It is difficult for us to bow. It is against our very individualistic culture. It's all tied in with personal freedoms and equal rights. These are all hard won. But there is also a downside to much of this. And one is a loss of the quality of surrender.

Surrender is now the more popular word – the old one was ‘obedience’ which can really rub us up the wrong way. Whatever word you care to use, it means following the Dhamma. And the reason we have to obey or surrender to the Dhamma is because that part of us which does not want to is the self. And the Dhamma will always ask the self to do what it does not want to do. Right up to its own final extinction.

This demand of the Dhamma – that we go against the flow of our conditioning – is symbolised in the story of the Buddha. Before he went to sit under the Bodhi Tree he put his bowl in the river and it flowed upstream. Someone once sent me a card with a dead fish in the river. The caption read: ‘Only dead fish go with the flow.’

The flow of the Dhamma is not for dead fish. We need to develop that attitude which puts its commands before the insistent demands of the self. And one way to remind ourselves of this is through the act of bowing.

There are many ways we can bow. In the Tibetan tradition, meditators prostrate themselves fully. In the Theravada tradition, we kneel back onto our ankles, bow forward to put both hands on the floor and then touch the floor with our heads. In the Zen tradition, the bow is from the waist. Perhaps we proud Westerners can bring ourselves to bow the head? If not that, then perhaps an anjali, where we join our hands at the chest. Failing that a blink and an ever-so subtle bow of the head.

Unless that attitude of surrender is expressed through the body in some way, no matter how subtle, I believe it lacks force. There's something holding back, something that does not want to give. And the Dhamma rewards only those who give. In the spiritual life you receive nothing until you've given. There are no credit cards.

However we choose to express our willingness to follow the Dhamma, it can also be turned into an open willingness to receive the gift of Dhamma and then an offering of whatever merit we may gain for the benefit of all beings. You will know the normal way of bowing, but you may also make bowing more meaningful to yourself. I was introduced to this way of expressing attitudes by the use of hands. At first, they are flat on the ground to express surrender. Then, the palms face upwards to express the willingness to receive whatever the Dhamma offer us, no matter how demanding. Then the hands are raised to express the desire to be of benefit to all beings.

When I first came into Buddhism it was through the school of Zen and there we were asked to bow from the waist – to everything. This meant when entering the Zendo, or any room for that matter, bowing to the food on your plate and the toilet you were about to and then used. And this gives us other reasons to bow – out of gratitude, out of respect, in awe and in praise. Whatever inspires the heart will want to express itself bodily. So if you've never tried bowing, give it a go. Fill the heart with a beautiful attitude and bow with that. See how it feels.

So bowing to the path, let's await the fruits. And that also expresses itself in our devotion to the practice. Just today. A day devoted to mindfulness.





5. Samvega : Raising Enthusiasm

Samvega is a word that suggests enthusiasm with a sense of urgency: Got to get the job done! This does not mean getting flustered, rushed and anxious. It's a quiet energy which realises there is no deadline. So long as there is a self, there will be some form of existence. Time is not the problem. How we use it might be.

To help raise this urgent enthusiasm, the Buddha recommends the contemplation of the four devaduta – the four messengers from the gods. It refers to the incidents in his youth when he came across a sick person, an aged person, a corpse and an ascetic sitting under a tree. The first three awoke him to the inevitable consequences of life and the fourth suggested the possibility of escape.

So the following phrases are meant to be reflections. They are not wishing ourselves to be sick, grow old and die. They are repeated gently in the heart and their truth value is accepted. We may notice also any reaction of aversion or fear that may arise as we repeat them. In so doing, we dissolve our obsession and enchantment with health, youth and life itself and crumble our anxieties and aversions around sickness, ageing and death.

Then after these contemplations, we must remind ourselves of the goal. Otherwise we might become a little gloomy. I have chosen some quotations from the Buddha concerning our glorious end.

So let us repeat these phrases in our hearts:

This body is subject to disease.

This body is of a nature to fall ill.

This body has not gone beyond sickness.

This body is subject to ageing.

This body has not gone beyond ageing.

This body is now in a process of ageing.

This body is subject to death.
This body has not gone beyond death.
This body will die.
Life is uncertain. Death is certain.

There is that which is not born, does not die, is not created, is not conditioned. If this were not so, there would be no escape from the conditioned, the created, birth, sickness, ageing and death.

There is a consciousness that is not coloured or in any way touched by the five senses or the citta. It has no boundary and in all directions it is full of light.

There is an end to all suffering and unsatisfactoriness.

The highest bliss is Nibbana.





6. Climbing A Mountain

The similarities between climbing a mountain and the spiritual life are referred to a lot in spiritual literature. Interestingly, the Buddha does this rarely, to my knowledge.

When we climb up, all we can see in front of us is where the next footstep will land. We need to be particularly attentive when the path is slippery or uneven. If we want to look around and see where we are, it is better to stop and do so. Sometimes we stop and we can see the view.

So it is with our practice. There are times we have to look around and reflect on what we are doing and why. But the purpose is not to get stuck and carry on thinking and worrying. Stopping too long on a mountain makes us feel cold and before long we want to go back down. So once we've got our bearings, we proceed step by step.

Every so often in our lives we can look at the view, look at the past and see what progress we have made. Sometimes it might feel we have not come very far while at others we can see just how much we have changed. If we see no progress, it could be that we're doing something wrong or perhaps we have spent a long period working through stuff and are still in the midst of it. But when we look back over a good stretch of time – four or five years – if we've been constant in our practice, we should certainly see improvement both in our interior life and our lives in society.

Now, no mountain is an easy climb. There are hard bits and easy bits, but all the way it is against gravity. Similarly with the spiritual path. The Buddha warned us it would be gradual and difficult. After all, just as we have to work against gravity to go up a mountain, so we must work against the mountainous drag of unskilful conditioning.

There is a conversation with a doubting practitioner. He complains that the path is hard. The Buddha replies that it is, but people work at it and achieve Nibbana. 'Nibbana! So what?' replies the complainant. 'Well,' says the Buddha, 'once you get through all this work, you will be contented and with it happy.'

So, just as that feeling of conquest and joyful arrival greets us at the top of a mountain – especially if there’s a café there – so when we finally get through all our work, we can drink of the fruit – contentedness (which means no longer harassed by sensual desires) and a heart that rests in joyfulness.

But to bring us back down to ground level, this is our work. The nitty-gritty of the spiritual life. Just that commitment – against all the negativity within us that wants us to stop and go and have a coffee – to establishing moment-to-moment mindfulness. Let’s do it! Let’s devote this day to developing a bright and constant awareness.







**THE
PRACTICE**





7. Right Posture

In the Theravada tradition, posture gets little emphasis. Indeed, I don't remember any of my teachers instructing me on how to sit. It was through the earlier experience in Zen, where right posture is greatly stressed, that I learned to sit properly for meditation.

For right posture, the legs can be crossed in the so-called Burmese posture in front of you, or in semi- or full lotus. To sit kneeling on a cushion is also viable as is sitting on a chair. You may change from one posture to another even within a sitting when necessary, but this is not conducive to deepening mindfulness and concentration. It is important, however, to have both knees at the same height to protect the spine. And with the three types of crossed legged posture, it is good practice to change the inner or under leg from left to right with every sitting.

The spine is the most important thing, however. Hold it erect without strain. In whatever posture you adopt, the knees should be below the hips. This ensures that the spine will retain its natural curvature. This may take effort at first. You may have to keep lifting it up. But once the muscles have been trained, the spine will stay erect seemingly without effort.

Imagine a puppet's string running from the base of the spine and pulling you up from the top of the head. As you lift up from the top of the head, you'll feel the chin go in a little.

Once you've established this energised spine, it's good practice to spend a little time relaxing everything. Pass your attention over your face and where you feel tension, relax it as best you can. Notice especially any tension around the jaw. This is where tension most frequently manifests. If after a quick scan and relaxing, the tension remains, screw up the face, then relax it. Do this until you feel all the muscles are truly relaxed.

It's the same with the shoulders. What you cannot relax by an act of will, you can help to relax by tightening the shoulders, holding them tight for a while, then slowly releasing them.

Deep breathing is effective for tension in the body. Take a deep breath, hold it, then just let the rib cage fall. This can be done as often as it takes to make you feel relaxed.

In this way the body is prepared for meditation – and we are also going a long way to preparing the citta. For the two are intimately linked. Indeed, the Buddha likens the relationship of the citta to the body to that of milk in water.

You can bring this awareness to the posture even while sitting. If the spine slumps, has lost energy or is even bent over, then make that mental intention to straighten it and slowly pull it up through the top of the head.

If there is tension in the jaw or shoulders, release it in the same way as before. But here it is often more skilful to put your attention on the sensations and allow them to dissipate in their own time. Scan and comb the sensations and catch any reaction. For tension in the body frequently has a mental component and by sitting with it patiently it allows the hidden mental tensions to release themselves.

Remember the body holds mental stuff that expresses itself in posture such as hunched shoulders. So straightening up the body is one way of releasing these tensions.

So however the legs are positioned, the spine should be energised and pulled up through the top of the head without tension. The rest of the body should be relaxed and the head should be poised on top, expressing the balance in the body of energy with relaxation. A good Buddha statue should demonstrate this exemplary posture. After all, this is the body language of the Awakened One.





8. The Breath

The breath. The body breathing. It's always with us. If it ever stopped, that would be worrying. So as a meditation object upon which to develop our skills, the breath is simply there waiting for us to use it.

The sensations of the breath are neutral. They don't excite us, don't depress us or make us anxious. Because of this, they are perceived as calm and gentle. This helps the mind to develop the same qualities.

So the constant gentle rising and falling of the abdomen lull the citta into a peaceful state. But here there is the danger of losing our sense of investigation. So we need also to keep that attitude of watching, investigating and experiencing.

For these reasons the breath is called the primary object and is referred to sometimes as our anchor, for it steadies our attention.

We have no need to try to become concentrated. The citta will naturally gather around the awareness. All we have to do is look. Pay attention. That's all.

Easier said than done! This is where patience is called for. Patient persistence. Just acknowledge what the mind is doing when it wanders off and bring the attention gently back to the breath.

Think of training a puppy to sit. If you smack it, it won't want to come near you. You have to pat its head gently and talk to it and praise it when it sits. So should we cajole ourselves.

Dullness and lethargy may visit but again we raise the effort. Of course, if these states prove too strong, then we must deal with them appropriately.

Not surprisingly, the breath is intimately connected to our emotional life. Just catch your breathing when you're angry for instance. So it may be that certain emotional states are held there. Many people feel anxiety around the breath. Not that the sensations of the breath are causing the anxiety. Others

find a constant feeling of control. This is linked to fear. In such a case, it's an opportunity to get in touch with those feelings. Don't do anything. Just see it as an opportunity to allow those feelings to release themselves. Our job is to feel and observe.

As the steadiness of attention grows and the concentration strengthens, the thought life and emotional life quieten. This affects the body and the breath becomes finer, sometimes so fine we seem unable to feel it any more. The body has become calmer than the citta and our discernment is too weak. When this happens, we continue to place attention on the area where we felt the breath, no matter how delicate the signals. Slowly, the strength of our attention grows with gathering concentration and the sensations become obvious once more.. The cycle may repeat again and again, the body and citta tumbling over each other into ever deepening states of awareness.

It may be that the breath becomes a soft, then a bright light. These are called *nimitta*, mental images. The procedure is just the same. We watch them in the same way. They are all signs to the meditator that the practice is progressing. Such moments may not come often in our meditation and it isn't necessary for them to. Insights can be had observing anything that arises and passes away within the field of awareness. Even so there are times when all is quiet and the meditation centres entirely on the sensation caused by the breath. When this happens, take full advantage and keep the practice going.





9. Noting

Labelling or noting is something the mind does automatically. It is part of the perceptual process we began to learn as toddlers. We cannot see, hear, touch, smell or feel anything without giving it a label, even when that label is ‘don’t know’. At its base, it is a word that encapsulates all the history and accumulated knowledge we have on a given experience. We may not be conscious of it, but it’s there running like a background programme to everything we do. So noting is bringing that process into awareness.

But if the practice were just that, then we would still be locked into the intellect when we know that spiritual truths can be experienced only outside the intellect. They are direct intuitive grasps of reality. So we need to remind ourselves that noting is just a skilful way to begin releasing the intuitive intelligence – panya– from its confusion with thought.

If the word seems very loud in the mind, even to the point of being unable to feel a sensation perhaps, this shows the meditator how embedded they are in thinking and intellectual processes. When this happens, we need to keep focusing the attention on the present sensation or emotional feelings and slowly we will coax the intuitive intelligence to leave thought behind and experience sensations as just sensations, feelings as just feelings. In fact this is how the Buddha expresses it in the *Discourse on How to Establish Right Mindfulness* –vedanasu-vedana-nupassi – to see or experience feelings ‘in’ feelings. This can take a lot of work, especially if the mind is wandering, so patience and perseverance are called for.

To maintain that energy in the practice the noting has to be deliberate as when a child who is beginning to delight in words points and shouts: ‘Birdie, birdie.’ The Mahasi Sayadaw describes it as throwing a stone at a wall. We are using the word not simply to contain the thinking mind, but also to help us focus on the object. If done with earnest intent, it is a powerful tool to get us focused. Especially when this is taken into everything we do throughout the day. When we really devote ourselves to moment-to-moment noting from the time we wake up to the time we fall asleep, by the day’s end we will see a very great increase in the sharpness of our discernment.

But the noting has to be done calmly and persistently and we must guard against errors – for instance, worrying whether we’ve got the right word or not. When a word fails to arise, any word will do that generally hits the mark. In the end you may end up using – thinking and feeling.

Another is concern at how many notes to make. Two, three or as many as you can as quick as you can. If we remember that the purpose is only to point the attention at the object, then we will note appropriately. Sometimes it can be slow. But it helps to note at a quicker speed when we are sleepy. And for the restless mind it is effective to note quickly. This channels that energy and allow us to find the emotion or feelings that are empowering the agitation. Then, when we can just experience those feelings, they will eventually exhaust themselves and we can return to more gentle noting. As with all techniques, we need to gauge the situation and use them as skilful means.

So let’s do just that. Just today. One day at a time. A complete devotion to the practice of establishing an unbroken line to attentiveness.





10. Noting Intention

What is the role of intention? What does it mean to note our intention? Isn't it to catch that moment before we do something? And in that moment, if we are fully aware of it, we have a choice. We can discriminate between a wholesome and an unwholesome intention. For at that point no kamma, no act has been committed. We haven't empowered intent into thinking, speaking or doing. Once it moves into action, then we have conditioned an intention to manifest its desire again. If, on the other hand, we resist it, then it fades. And thus the conditioning that gives rise to such intentions is weakened.

So you can see how important it is to note and acknowledge our intentions in the process of 'deconditioning' those states that lead us towards samsara, the world of unsatisfactoriness, and those states that lead us out of samsara towards Nibbana.

To catch them we have to go slow because they arise so fast and because our conditioning is to translate them quickly into action. So we need to establish a habit of noting our intentions. Let's begin right here in the sitting. Let's note that intention to maintain mindfulness and let's really empower it. A real commitment, an *adhithana*, a resolute resolution. If during the sitting, we want to move, note the intention. In that way, we can really question whether it is skilful to move. If so, then move. And know that we have done so skilfully. In other words, it will enhance our meditation. When we want to get up from the sitting, note that. When we are standing, note the intention to go to the walking place. At the walking place note the intention to walk. And so on.

We need to do this especially in daily activities where we can lose our attentiveness so easily. If we go slowly and note the intentions, we find a greater alertness comes to our awareness. Before climbing the stairs, note the intention. Note the intention when we want to open the door. All the different activities in the toilet, let's note them. Especially, around food and drink – note our intentions. And acknowledge them. Really know this is an intention. And in that moment, recognise it as virtuous or not virtuous, skilful or unskilful.

To be aware of our intentions is to be aware of the smallest movements of desire in the citta. The more we begin to notice them, the more we realise that this is the core of the citta: it desires. It desires to become, to be happy, to enjoy the pleasures of life and it also desires to get rid of anything that frustrates it. To be aware of these intentions is to put us in charge rather than leave us a servant to our desires.

Finally, a little exercise. During walking meditation, when you are standing and noting your intention to walk, keep up the intention but don't move. Then decide to do so. What is it that brings that intention into the actual, that potential into manifestation?

So now let's really raise up that intention to devote this day, just this one day, to an unbroken continuous mindfulness.





11. Noting Daily Activities

When we are on retreat, the Mahasi Sayadaw has asked us to note from the moment we get up to the moment we fall asleep – a whole day without break. At first it might seem impossible. But it's only a habit, after all. Practice makes perfect. If you ever had piano or tennis lessons you will remember doing the same thing over and over again, be it the scales or the backhand volley, over and over again. Every so often, it really was perfect! How satisfying and encouraging that was. Of course, we're not talking here about perfection. More, excellence – just right in the moment.

We have to make that firm determination to note every action from the moment we wake to the moment we fall asleep. It doesn't matter when we make the resolution. And if we're standing outside our room or moving out of the hall and we can't remember making any intention or even noticing how we moved, never mind. Stop. Make the resolution and start again.

So to begin at the beginning, let's make it simple and let's take our time. After all what else is there to do? Try to split the day into smaller and smaller segments. For instance, going from the bedroom to the corridor outside.

Let us suppose you are sitting in a chair. As soon as the idea is acknowledged, we make the intention – *intending to rise*. We stay with all the movements till we are standing – *rising, rising*. Then **stop!** Note – *standing, standing*. The next idea is to move to the door. *Intending to walk. Walking, walking. Stop!* *Standing, standing. Intending to open the door. Lifting (the arm) lifting (feeling all the sensations of movement in the arm); touching (feeling the metal of the handle), turning, turning (feeling the pressure and communicating with the resistance; pulling, pulling (feeling all the sensation in the arm), (if it is necessary to take a step back) stepping, stepping (noting all the sensations in the leg and foot); releasing, releasing (or letting go, letting go – always choosing the phrase that comes the easiest.) Stop!* *Intending to walk. Walking, walking (feeling all the sensations in the leg and foot as we move through the door) Stop!* *Intending to turn. Turning, turning (again staying with the feelings of movement and the sensations in the foot); intending to close the door, stretching, stretching*

(feeling the hand and arm moving through the air); *touching*, *touching* (as we again contact the metal) and so on.

Yes, it can be this precise. I was taught that we need such precision if we want to build up a sharp moment-to-moment attentiveness. I have had people work with me for a few years and then finally, they actually try this. They come back and tell me: 'You know it really works.' Noting can come in useful in ordinary life when we are doing something physical like toiletry, washing the pots, walking from here to there, just to keep the mind on what we are doing.

As a teacher I have stopped expecting anyone to follow my instructions. This frees me from sadness and frustration when I see a meditator not practising properly. But it does mean I am really joyful when meditators do actually follow these sorts of instructions.

So please, give it a go. Just one day. This day. A continual effort at moment-to-moment noting and see if it really does work. You'll never know till you've given it 101 per cent.





12. Standing Meditation

Standing meditation, also part of our practice, is one of the four classical postures which include sitting, walking and lying down. Normally we use it as a break from sitting or before we start walking meditation.

Remember that if you want to stand during the sitting meditation, note it and make it a conscious decision. Experience all the movements it takes to get into the standing posture. Make the same noted, conscious decision when we want to sit again.

Standing like this, we can do exactly what we do when sitting: note and watch the breath and anything that arises and passes away which draws our attention. We can stand ordinarily or we could use a *chi kung* posture which helps to raise energy. This is useful when we stand not to give the legs a break but because we feel dull and lethargic. We stand with feet shoulder width apart. We bend the knees, pull the stomach in so the lower back feels straight and lift up through the top of the head.

The etiquette of a meditation hall asks us to stand with our arms by our side rather than up in the air. We can raise a little more energy by imagining two small balloons under the arm pits and holding the arms out a few inches from the body.

Before starting the walking meditation, it's good to stand a while and ground ourselves in the feelings of the feet. With a still focus on them, we can make the intention to walk. Even as we walk, if the mind has wandered, we can stop, stand a while, collect ourselves and then carry on. So the standing meditation is a place where we come to a halt, recollect what we are doing, establish that focus and make the commitment to stay focused till the end of the set walk.

When we come to the end, it is good to stop and do the same thing. Then there is the intention to turn and the action of turning. And then stop, stand and start all over again. This is a powerful way to build moment-to-moment awareness. Don't forget while returning to the sitting posture to go at a speed

that can maintain that collectedness and the benefit of our work in walking will carry into the sitting.

How long should we stand? I've heard of meditators standing for an hour, two hours and more. One meditator began to worry us at Gaia House because he stood out on the lawn, absolutely still, virtually all day. He was standing on the edge of a bank where the grass suddenly gave way to a lower level. I was out there looking at him and turned away. When I looked back, he was scrambling up the side of the bank! I was once on a meditation retreat and a big man got up to practice standing meditation right next to me. Suddenly there was a great crash and we all got up to help him. He was too embarrassed and annoyed to receive our helping hands. I just felt lucky he'd fallen forward. There's a limit to everything, it seems. But I offer one small warning; long standing meditation is not good if you suffer from varicose veins.

I hope I have convinced you that standing meditation is an important part of our practice. And again something we can take into daily life where we often find ourselves standing in queues, in lifts and so on.

So now let us slowly build up our moment-to-moment awareness by joining up all the parts of our practice into the one continual unbroken line of awareness. Let's make that act of devotion. A complete self-emptying into the practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





13. The Importance Of Walking Meditation

Do not underestimate the importance of walking meditation. Even though we often relegate it to a pastime – ‘we can’t sit all day, so let’s walk’ – it is a continuation of sitting.

First, the body needs exercise and it’s alright to walk fast for the first five or ten minutes. If we did this every session, we would have walked quickly for at least an hour a day – or three to four miles. Probably more than we would normally do in ordinary daily life. In this way the body keeps fit which is important for us, because through our education and sports class (dreaded for some, a delight to others), our bodies have become accustomed to exercise. The Greeks stressed it – a healthy mind in a healthy body. And lack of exercise is one cause of the obesity we see today. The other, of course, is eating too much. If you put on weight during a retreat, something is wrong!

Once we feel loosened up and a little exercised, start the slow walking, perhaps lifting and placing. Gradually slow down till you can see at least the three portions of the step clearly: lifting, moving and placing. You can even slow down enough to see the six parts: lifting (the heel), rising, moving, lowering, touching (as the foot touches the ground) and placing.

Feel the foot peeling off the floor, rising, moving forward, lowering to the ground and then that pressure into the foot as we place it. The more slowly we go, the more we see and feel.

Second, walking continues our awareness of sensations. As we feel and watch the abdomen rising and falling, so we feel and observe the sensations caused by the foot’s rising and falling. In other words we are constantly observing anicca, impermanence. Walking meditation is a powerful way to develop insight into this quality.

Alongside this, our concentration is developing, our ability to keep the mind still upon the object so that it can focus in. A loud object, such as pain, makes it easy to develop – the attention cannot resist a throbbing knee, after all. Even the most hyperactive, hyper-restless person can be brought to a

locked focus by a stinging ache in the knees. Concentration built up on neutral feeling is strong and lasting. Walking is especially good for this. It is neutral in its feelings and because the action is more gross than breathing, it can be followed more easily.

On returning to the sitting posture, we need not go so slowly but at a speed where we hold our moment-to-moment concentration. In this way a seamless line of awareness can be developed throughout the day.

So let's give walking meditation a lot of kudos. Let's devote ourselves to it as energetically as we devote ourselves to sitting. Let's do that. Just this day, devoted to establishing a seamless moment-to-moment attentiveness.





14. Walking Like Sitting

Walking meditation can be used to practise just as we do when we are sitting. In the *Fearless Discourse* the Buddha tells us that while engaged in walking meditation in the jungle – before his awakening, of course – he felt great fear, probably caused by the roar of a tiger. But he kept walking. We have to infer here that he did not force the attention onto his feet, but stayed with the mental state that had arisen.

Similarly, we can use walking meditation to continue our investigation of mental states, especially when they are loud. It may be that we have some depression or worry in the heart. In this case, we walk gently up and down with our attention on those emotional states. Our awareness of the feet will be in the background only. This is a good way to work with heavy states. It relieves a lot of the pressure and creates a sense of ease around them, whereas with sitting, we may have a tendency to tighten up.

Then there is dullness in the mind and lethargy in the body. Rather than struggling with these on the cushion, bobbing up and down, it is often more skilful to walk with them. Up and down. Up and down. Scanning the body and head. Getting in touch with sensations. Walking means we won't fall asleep. More than that, it gently raises energy which helps to purify those states. Our job, remember, is not to get rid of slothful and torpid feeling, but to allow it to express and thus exhaust itself. I usually have an image of taking a great big reluctant St Bernard out for a walk.

It works well for restlessness, too. Paradoxically if you go around gently when restless rather than fast which often turns into rushing, such feelings often evaporate quickly. Again we simply walk up and down, up and down, focusing on the feelings, perhaps scanning the body.

In these ways walking meditation can complement our experiences in sitting. If there is turbulence in the sitting which disappears when we get up, then we should practise slow walking.

So remember, walking meditation is integral to practice and complements sitting perfectly. The balance between them is up to the meditator. Some sit and walk for equal lengths of time. Others prefer to sit longer, perhaps an hour or hour-and-a-half and walk for forty-five minutes. Others vary it throughout the day. Whatever works. If our sitting practice is deteriorating, I would bet it is because we are not doing enough walking meditation.

So making sure we bring a proper balance to our practice, let us now commit ourselves today, just this day, to moment-to-moment mindfulness.





15. In-Between Times

It's the in-between times that often let our practice down. Something in us thinks they are not important. We allow the mind to wander. A pity, because it undermines the good work we are putting in elsewhere.

When we rise from sitting, let's stand briefly and realise that it is necessary to keep at least general mindfulness of our actions until we find the place to do walking meditation. And then make it a resolution.

Or perhaps we are going to visit the toilet. So why rush there? Indeed, why wait till we have to rush? Why not make the trip a walking meditation? We need not go so slowly, but we can turn it into a valuable exercise.

There are all those things we do in the bathroom from washing our faces to using the toilet. Focus on these to detect any aversion around the calls of nature. Perhaps we see them as perfunctory: Let's just get them over with. If we catch ourselves rushing through these necessary actions, stop. Reflect on that. All this is part of our practice.

Then there's going up and down stairs. In itself, that can be a complete walking meditation. Why not take our time and note the various actions it takes to get us to the top of the stairs and back down again. We may find ourselves wandering into the bedroom and hanging around the bed wondering whether to have a kip. Having decided against such unskilful action, bring attention to bear and recommit to the practice.

Little occasions are opportunities too. For instance, the opportunity to communicate with a door. Rather than crash through, feel the metal. Feel the spring's resistance. Use just sufficient pressure to open it. Experience the actions it takes to do this. Close it with the same mindfulness. The fridge too. Recall old habits of slamming the door shut. Instead, treat it with care and attention. When handling an object such as a plate, regard it as a Ming vase. Show it respect. The same with cutlery. Or putting on our shoes. Why rush the job? Let's take our time and turn it into a meditative exercise.

Acquiring the habit of making each action a precious moment will lift the whole of our practice. Often, we must beware being hijacked by a mood. We may rise from the posture and suddenly restlessness, like a wind, carries us from the hall. We need to stop and gauge where we are. Just stand and wait for the mood to die down or pass and then move. Much the same with aversion: ‘Don’t want to do this now!’ Stop. Acknowledge it and wait for it to ease. Then move.

So let’s devote the whole of this day – not just the formal practice – to moment-to-moment mindfulness and make sure it is all joined up. Not a moment lost. Building up the habit. For that’s all it is. Let’s commit ourselves to that. Just this day. One day dedicated to the practice of unbroken mindfulness.





16. Being In The Moment

What does it all mean – being in the moment? Being present? Being in the now? Every teacher worth their salt tries to find a new way of expressing this experience. Perhaps the best approach is to state first what it is not.

It is not mindlessness or being unaware of what we are doing. Often we may be precise and mindful when making tea. We mindfully walk to a seat. We mindfully sit down and mindfully raise the cup to our lips. Next minute we realise the tea is all drunk! What happened to it? Who drank it? We must have! But where have we been? On holiday probably or planning the great things we'll do once the course is over.

So that's pretty clear. Whenever the mind wanders into a dream, for sure we are not present. We are not aware of what we are doing or thinking. The thinking, dreaming, fantasising have hijacked us and taken us on a ride. In fact, we have been taken for a ride!

But is that all there is? Surely a thief in the night, carefully wandering about a house, ever so mindfully opening drawers, shutting doors – surely they must be mindful! They are – but as we know such activity does not lead to the end of suffering. It leads instead to grief, one way or the other.

So being mindful in the moment presupposes a view, a way of being mindful. That is to train the knowing to become aware of the Three Characteristics. It is a good habit to start meditation, or any activity, reflecting on the impermanence of everything; that without vigilance we can get caught up in greed and aversion – the unwholesome propensities; and that this psychophysical organism does not constitute a 'self'. It's not me. Once we've set the view right, we can as it were 'forget' it. Trust that the knowing is seeing correctly and we devote ourselves to the vipassana or to whatever we are engaged in doing.

The following small exercise can elicit that sense of being in the present moment.

Stand still and note standing. Remember that we are standing for standing's sake. We're not waiting for a bus or friend. We're just standing. When that is established we remind ourselves that we are not going anywhere, we've already arrived – here. We're not trying to achieve anything. That means doing something now for a future result. The result is already here – just standing. Since we are not communicating, not performing, we don't have to be a personality. We can be nobody. Keep up the quiet gentle noting and let the awareness spread out to become aware of anything that strikes at any of the sense doors – a sound, a smell, some feeling or sensation arising in the body, the colours and shapes in the carpet we are looking at. When we are steady like this – in the moment – we make the intention to walk keeping this same spacious awareness. Here we are experiencing 'being in the moment' in a large broad, open-spaced way.

Once this feels fairly established, start narrowing the focus into the feet. Once we feel focused in the particular, we can open up to the all again. We keep doing this till we are sure of our awareness of the particular and/or of the general – that it's all the same 'being in the moment'.

It is so important to take this out into ordinary daily life too so that being on retreat and being active in the world become a seamless continuum.

So let's not lose that because that is the path. Let's devote ourselves to establishing this sort of moment-to-moment awareness throughout the whole day. Just today. It's enough.





17. Achieving Nothing, Going Nowhere, Being Nobody

My own experience is that standing still connects me in some way with time. Sitting, walking or lying still helps me contact the body, but standing makes the experience of time more obvious for me.

When we stand, it is usually because we are waiting for something to happen: for service at a supermarket counter or for the bus to come. We adopt a posture of waiting – which is perhaps why standing makes us become aware of time.

Noting the intention and coming to a standstill after walking concludes an action. Right there we can experience the ‘death’ of an event. Yet something arises immediately afterwards. Just standing. A moment of stillness and then the mind starts up again. Noting the standing posture and keeping our attention on the whole body, brings us again and again into the present moment.

We can then relax into the spaciousness of all the senses. What is it we hear or see or smell? Can we feel the room’s atmosphere or the ‘touch’ of other people? Becoming sensitive to the whole of our present experience, we can suddenly meld into the immediate experience and all sense of time is lost.

It helps to repeat ‘achieving nothing’ for when we are ‘achieving’, we are doing something for a future result. In this mode there is no future, just the abiding present

Repeat also ‘going nowhere’ for being in the present we have already arrived.

But there is more than this – because we are standing in this receptive mode, we are not communicating. We are not becoming anybody. Not being someone. A nobody. In a crowd, we may feel anonymous but this feeling occurs in relation to others. Here, we experience a relationship to ourselves. The mind silent without expression. The heart calm without turbulence. The body still without movement. And yet there we are standing. Ready as it were. For what?

If we can capture all this in one moment, we experience a loss of time. An absorption into the immediate present. And there without time, the self cannot exist. For we have entered this moment from a position of Right Awareness.

This is not the same as when we lose time and self into a pleasurable experience with the intent to indulge ourselves. That's easy – how often do we get 'lost' in a film, in a conversation, in nature? But then we are reinforcing that old habit of seeking happiness in the sensual, pleasurable world. This brings only momentary gratification before the thirst arises again.

But just standing doesn't do that. Contentment does not bring a thirst for the object. But it does bring a thirst for itself. This growing thirst that turns to yearning is the heart's desire to seek an everlasting happiness.

So here's our goal. To seek out here in this moment the contentment that prefigures our final liberation. It's right here in front of our noses. That's why we must devote ourselves to this practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness!





18. To Do Or Not To Do

To do or not to do – that is the question. We shall see, hopefully, that this is really a problem of language.

When we sit in meditation, our work is to watch and experience. That's all. But such is our conditioning that we forever want to do something about the interior situations we find ourselves in, never mind the exterior ones.

The mind wanders. It wanders a lot. And we wonder what to do about it. The heart emotes and emotes a lot. And we wonder what to do about it. The body fidgets and hurts. We wonder what to do about it. This wondering comes from the self which doesn't like the conditions it finds itself in and, worse, dislikes being in a position where it is not in control. So it feels it needs to 'do' something.

It's been thus since time began. The self has wanted to manipulate the environment, wanted to be in control. And it has got us into a fine mess. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here now struggling with all this stuff.

So the instruction is – don't do anything. But this 'don't do anything' means only that. That is, don't react to these internal conditions. Just stay put and watch. This also means we have to be patient. We have to bear with things just as they are.

Now this 'don't do anything' doesn't mean we should lie on a beach. This was a problem that arose out of Zen's paradoxical way of expressing things. Yogis took it the wrong way. Zen talks of the effortless effort which does not mean idleness. It doesn't mean we can go and lie on a beach and the awakening will arise simply because we are finally doing nothing at all. Far from it. Behind the scenes, as it were, there is a lot of activity of a different sort.

This activity is akin to that of a naturalist. If we want to discover the way nature is, we don't interfere, we watch. The nature programmes on TV are wonderful in that they just watch animals in the wild. When we say in the wild

we mean just watching animals as they are themselves when left alone. Left alone by us!

We can say that when we sit in meditation we are watching the body-citta complex in the wild. We just leave it alone and observe. And this observation is intimate. We actually experience what is happening. We feel sensations and feelings, moods and emotions and we know thoughts and images. That's the 'doing' in vipassana.

So, perhaps instead of telling ourselves not to do anything and get ourselves into all sorts of contradictions, let's say we are 'doing vipassana' and know what we mean by that. We are watching and experiencing anything that arises and passes away within the scope of our attention – without any interference whatsoever.

Now, let's do some vipassana.





19. Tips On Maintaining Mindfulness

All teachers will share with their students the little tips they've picked up on the way from other teachers, by hearsay and through their own experimentation.

Here are some that you may find useful:

A few moments of reflection before sitting or walking. Take stock of the mood you are in. Recall your weaknesses. Make a firm commitment to make this sitting/walking count.

A few moments of reflection after sitting or walking. You have to be careful this doesn't turn into a critical self-judgmental or self-praising inner dialogue. You are reflecting on the past sitting and asking yourself:

- *How well did I maintain my commitment to moment-to-moment mindfulness?*
- *Was I really committed to bringing myself back into this present moment or not?*
- *What hindrances came up and how did I deal with them?*
- *Did I do OK or could I have been more skilful?*
- *Which of the three characteristics was I most aware of: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness or not-self?*
- *Did I use times of peacefulness skilfully?*

And then make a resolution for the next sitting/walking period.

Of course, you must remember to remind yourself!

You can stop anytime during a sitting if things are not going well, for instance if thoughts are racing away or if some state, such as dullness, has arisen. Reflect in a similar way. You don't have to go hell for leather. Meditate, meditate, meditate!

For instance, if you feel you need to raise interest, you can ask: am I clinging onto anything at this moment in time? Am I averse to anything at the moment? Is there something I'm not aware of?

There are times in the day when your practice tends to slacken. It's an individual thing. But once you realise, for instance, that 11am is a drowsy period for you, then that's where you need to put in a little energy. The outcome of this action can be to raise your energy for the whole day.

Remember doing your corrections at school? Your teacher would tell you to do it again and do it right. Similarly now, if you find you have done something mindlessly, such as opening a door and walking from here to there, go back and do it again. Make the intention and the going back a mindfulness exercise.

On a long retreat, you need to exercise. A good twenty to thirty minutes of strong walking every day can be a walking period. Other exercises are also useful in toning the body such as t'ai chi or yoga. Take care of the body.

Sleep is necessary. Depending on age, you may feel the need for a siesta after lunch. This is a healthy thing to do but don't do more than the old '40 winks'. After forty minutes, research shows that sleep deepens and you will wake up groggy. Relaxing in a sitting posture for ten to twenty minutes can be sufficient. So you don't have to feel guilty about taking a post-prandial power nap!

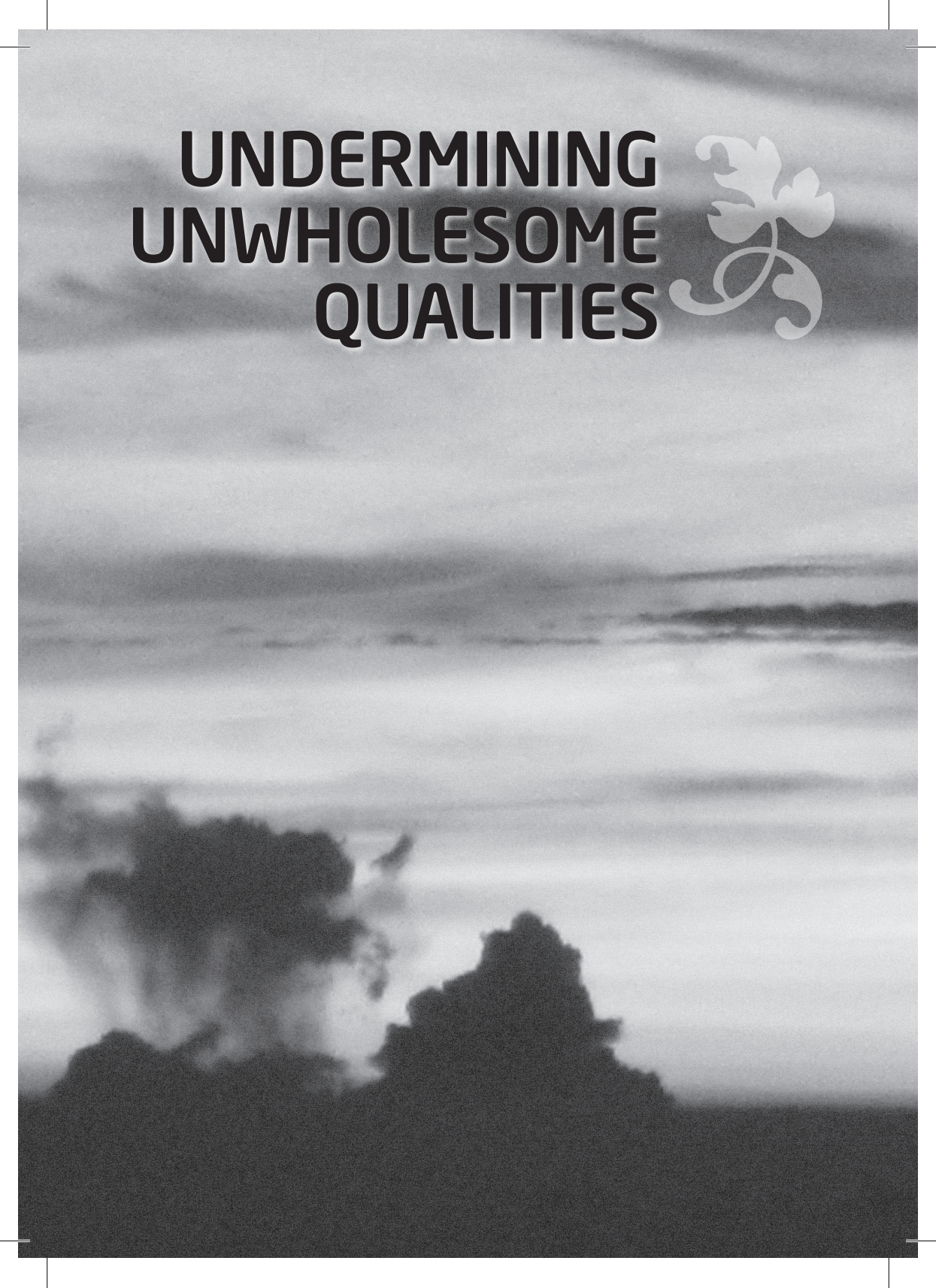
If during the practice you notice you are getting lazy with noting, devote a certain time to vigorous noting and it will lift your practice. It can be as short as five minutes. The more often we do it, the more it brightens up the practice.

If you are sitting with ease, try to extend the period. But be careful to give yourself at least forty minutes walking time to separate periods or sitting fatigue may set in.





UNDERMINING UNWHOLESOME QUALITIES





20. Riding The Dragon – Taming The Ox

In a film I saw, a drug addict was introducing someone to heroin. She told him it was called ‘chasing the dragon’ and that he would spend the rest of his time trying to chase this one experience. I thought this to be a most wonderful metaphor.

The Buddha talks about *tanha*, desire that can turn to craving for sensual pleasure, seeking satisfaction here, now there. It is a quest to repeat former delights and to find new ones that are even more pleasurable. The primary experience of anything pleasurable or enjoyable becomes unforgettable, for example the first time we fall in love or the first time we make love. Or our first job. Perhaps the first time we travel abroad. In my case, the first time I ate a curry! These first times have an extra zap we are forever trying to recreate. Yes, we were happy then, really happy.

Through our practice we begin to see these moments as riding the dragon. Once we are saddled and strapped to its back, how hard it is to get off – even when we know it is ruining the body. Addiction is not suffered only by those who take class A drugs. We are all addicted to something or other which we feel compelled to obey, especially in times of stress – food, work, drink, sex. There are lots of them. For as always these pleasure palaces are also refuges.

Contrast this with the image of taming the ox from the ox-herding pictures of Zen. Here the seeker must first find the ox by following its footprints. Once found, they have to train the ox until it becomes docile and they can ride it. Our work can be seen as transforming the wild dragon into the obedient ox.

We need to take this out into our daily lives, but on retreat we have to make special effort to avoid our Shangri-Las. The Buddha uses the word *appamado* which translates as earnest, diligent but, in this case, I prefer the word vigilant. As soon as the dragon appears we need to be right there to note and acknowledge it. We can waste so much time in futile fantasy. We need to be especially vigilant when concentration is developed but not steady. The mind

then has a lot of power. One moment of slippage and the seductive dragon will appear and away we go. The whole sitting, the whole day. It is then such a struggle to regain our composure.

Why let this happen? There is no need so long as we keep up that effort to be mindful and that mindfulness will be the more empowered if we continually raise interest, curiosity – the wholesome desire to see things as they really are. Then no matter how much the dragon tries to kindle our desires with its fiery breaths of craving, our vigilance shields us and turns them back onto the dragon itself. Since all fire is but transformation, so dragon turns ox.

Now wary of all dragons, let us raise our devotion to be vigilant. That wide-awake attentiveness to anything that arises and passes away within the field of awareness. Just for today. Just one day at a time and all dragons will become oxen – eventually.





21. Catching Mara

The central piece of the Buddha's psychology is the Wheel of Dependent Origination which shows how we create suffering for ourselves. No one can cause us psychological pain – we do that to ourselves. We must face this fact squarely. The answer, therefore, to our dukkha – our dissatisfaction and suffering – lies entirely within us. Although this denies us the relief of blaming others, it compensates by empowering us to take charge of our citta and begin the arduous task of cleaning up the mess. And that's one of the gifts of vipassana.

For our job is just to observe and experience whatever the citta offers us, especially at the feeling level – those feelings coming from the heart. When these arise at the heart centre in the middle of the chest, they can be recognised as felt emotions – anger, sadness, craving and so on. But when they appear in the rest of the body, for instance as tightness in the abdomen or heat in the stomach or restlessness in the body, then we know them as feelings. And we need to treat them as we would a grumpy child. We want these little Maras to express themselves in their rawness. When we allow this, just like any natural turbulence such as a hurricane, they exhaust themselves. They burn out.

To do this we need to be at that observation post, sharp, awake and interested – interested in experiencing these feelings as not me, not mine. When we note them, point at them, that 'distance' we experience between the knowing and the feeling is a not-self insight. It allows us stay aloof and outside the emotion. If we fail here, the energy slips along its usual pathway into the mind and off we go – nasty fantasies and beautiful daydreams. Whether we meant to or not, we reinforce an old habit of indulging these emotions when this happens.

No matter. As soon as we wake from them, we must note, recognise and acknowledge them and bring the attention back to the feeling. Slowly we cut off that avenue of indulgence and the feeling has no option but to blow itself out as feeling-sensation. Once our position is steady, we can, as it were, close

in on the feelings and become more intimate with them. The Buddha instructs us to experience ‘feelings in feelings’, that is, to really open up to them. Slowly but surely this is the way old unwholesome mental habits are undermined and eventually rooted out of the system.

That position we acquire through vipassana sits between the feeling as it arises and the natural reaction we have learnt towards it. So when a lusty feeling arises and perhaps an image appears in the mind, the reaction is to indulge it. That indulgence empowers that habit to develop the same old theme. In so doing it reinforces the root habit of seeking happiness in sensual pleasure. If we are not vigilant and persistent in coming off the fantasies, they will simply grow and take over our meditation, our daily lives. The same happens with any emotion we care to name.

When we practise like this, we purify the heart of its unwholesome and unvirtuous desires. These energies are then released to be transformed into those virtues that will help us on the path. But more important, by working in this way and seeing clearly how we create suffering, we gain more and more motivation to end that suffering. It is within our power to do so.

So let’s not waste time. Let’s get on with the practice. Just today, this whole day devoted to the practice of purifying the heart by way of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





22. Too Much Effort

There are three words which appear together and are repeated throughout the *Discourse on How to Establish Mindfulness*: *atapi sampajanno satima*. This phrase translates directly as ‘with ardent energy, with intuitive intelligence, mindfully’ – to dwell in the moment with that energetic mindfulness and intuitive intelligence. This word *atapi* comes from the word *tapos* meaning heavy ascetic practices. That’s the sort of energy it refers to. A real commitment and devotion to establishing *sati*, mindfulness.

If we just had to put our backs into the practice, it would be simple, but as usual, wherever the self turns up complication and difficulty follow. There are, as I’m sure you have experienced, two types of wrong effort: too much and too little. Here I deal with the former.

When we practise with too much energy, wrong attitude has crept in. We’re trying too hard and when we stand back and reflect on the attitude it’s invariably trying to achieve or get something. This can often be saturated with anxiety. We’re trying to be very concentrated. Or we’re trying to see something, trying to have insight. When this happens, we can sometimes hold the attention steady for a considerable time, but then when the mind flies off, it can really fly off. At times it can feel as though we have lost control. This is because all the wrong effort, that energy we’ve poured into the practice, suddenly switches to the fantasy and off we go.

So when we suffer from the restless, wandering mind, it may not be just the hindrance of restlessness. Perhaps we are trying too hard. And we’re doing this because a wrong attitude has slipped in.

Similarly, with this wrong effort everything may seem to be going all right and suddenly the whole meditation collapses. It’s as if we can’t sit any more. The mind just won’t stay put at all. When this happens, take a break. Go for a long walk and have a cup of tea – keeping a relaxed, open and spacious mindfulness. Wait till the feeling of wanting to sit arises again and go back to the meditation with a clear intention to go easy, to just observe. It will be easier for us to regain the meditation if we can reflect on what has happened and realise it has been a case of too much effort.

When we come to understand what is happening, even there in the sitting we can stop and reflect on our practice. Perhaps we catch the attaining, achieving mind in action. Perhaps we catch the subliminal dialogue pushing us to achieve something. Perhaps we get in touch with that anxiety – fear of failure? Perhaps we’ve listened to a talk that has raised enthusiasm in us, but we’ve then taken a wrong turn. Perhaps we’ve seen someone who on the outside seems to be doing excellent practice and out of unacknowledged jealousy we’ve pushed ourselves to practise. All sorts of strange and nefarious reasons can steal up on us so we must keep a sharp look out for these little devils!

So Right Effort is just enough energy to keep the attention on the object. That’s all. As simple as that. Let’s gather our strength and draw it around our practice. Let’s commit ourselves to this day, this one day, to establishing a moment-to-moment mindfulness.





23. Thinking ... Thinking ... Thinking ...

What is a thought? What is an image? There are so many and there are all sorts. The mind is so busy. Apart from when those little spaces of no thought appear is there ever a time of no thinking, no image making – apart from deep sleep?

Now we don't want to destroy the faculty of thought or imagination. Far from it. We want to be its master, rather than its uncomplaining servant. So at first it does seem we are trying to 'kill thought', but the noting serves only to give us back control.

When we find we're caught up in an inner movie and we note 'thinking, thinking' or 'worrying, worrying', at least we are aware of what we were thinking. After we have noted, of course, the other thinking stops momentarily, for the mind cannot think two thoughts at the same time. So although we note 'thinking, thinking' it is good practice to stay looking at that same spot where the last thought arose and hold it there, till we can see it has quietened down. Then we re-enter the body, either to the breath or to the presenting emotional state which is empowering the thinking.

If the emotional state has a lot of energy, we stay feeling it while watching the incipient intention to return to the fantasy. As the emotion begins to lose energy, the force of that intention also begins to diminish.

If an image comes to the mind and we pay attention to it, it may very well grow. So when it comes to colours, shapes, figures in the imagination, it is best to note them and turn away. It's not just images but also sounds, such as a tune that keeps repeating. Note 'hearing, hearing' and turn away from it. It's a bit like not taking notice of an unruly child. They stop acting out when they see no one is paying them the attention they crave.

For the mind seems to have its own little energy source and will often create scatty thoughts – useless inconsequential words and ideas jumbled up with images. By turning away from them and drawing our attention into the breath, such energy is brought to the service of vipassana. Such restlessness

in the mind is a sign telling us we lack concentration and effort. So by really making a commitment to observe and experience the breath, we can still the mind.

It is important to remind ourselves that we are trying to disentangle this wonderful intuitive intelligence we have from its confusion with thought. We need to remind ourselves that thoughts make us view the world in a particular way. They carry history and attitude. One only has to think of a concrete word like ‘car’, or a value word like ‘beauty’ or a philosophical word like ‘freedom’ to realise how our ways of experiencing the world and ourselves in the world is determined and distorted by them. Never mind that deepest of all distortions, the great delusion of believing that I am a ‘me’, a substantial entity, a continuous being, an uncompounded person, a self.

That’s where our real task is – to dissolve the delusion of self. We can’t do this without releasing our intuitive intelligence from thought. So let’s devote this day to that, just this one day, to developing awareness of our thought patterns. Of how thoughts are manufactured as expressions of mental states. Just this inquiry will release us from dukkha.



24. Eating! Taking The Indulgence Out Of Enjoyment (Renunciation)

Of the two unwholesome roots, acquisitiveness and aversion, the latter is easier to work with for it distances us from the object. Paradoxically, we remain attached to it until we have rid ourselves of it. But acquisitiveness – greed – is too subtle to tell from pure enjoyment for it dissolves into the experience and is virtually impossible to distinguish from appreciative joy.

Eating gives us a chance to begin discriminating between these two. We eat a few times every day so there's never a lack of opportunity for this investigation. On retreat we can really get down to the nitty-gritty of indulgence psychology and we can also always find time in daily life – even if it's just a biscuit.

First, it's most important to get in contact with the body and feel the hunger. Some will be the natural appetite proper to the body and some of it greed which is seeking happiness and comfort in food, toast, chips and other delights. Then once we have the plate before us, as with all actions, start with the Right Intention. When monastics chant the food requisite verse, part of it says: 'I eat this food only to nourish the body. I will allay hunger without overeating so that I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease.'

Then having set the right attitude we take our first mouthful with our attention firmly on the palate and experience directly the sensual delight of tasting ... tasting ... tasting. When we are clear what tasting is, a purely physical sensation, we may then detect the mental atmosphere that has arisen around it – delight. We know that it has arisen dependent on the sensations of taste. Notice that after each mouthful, especially as the hunger lessens, there is a feeling of gratification.

After each mouthful, we put down the cutlery and begin again with the intention to eat. Staying with that intention for a while, we capture its power. The wanting, the craving. Again part of it is natural and part unwholesome. We keep eating. Then, there will come a moment in the meal when the body begins to signal enough – hopefully. Attending to that bodily feeling, we may be aware that another part of us hasn't had enough at all. Okay. We sit with

that – greed ... greed ... until it passes. When all desire for eating has passed, what is the state of mind? I am hoping you will be able to call it contentment.

The distinction between contentment (the mind without desire) and gratification (desire satisfied) is crucial because one leads to liberation and the other to rebirth as a Hungry Ghost – and I mean rebirth in this very life!

But there is a more profound reason for this exercise. It engages the same psychology we find in any form of worldly pleasure or happiness from basic sensual pleasure to aesthetic delights to the joys of relationship and even spiritual ecstasy. All of it is to be enjoyed – this is our human birthright. But once the experience is corrupted by a wrong relation of grasping and at worse identifying then we are on our way to unsatisfactoriness, a continual gnawing sense of lack.

When pleasure and joy are denied, frustration follows. There is always that underlying anxiety of loss and if something is lost, grief. Let's save ourselves a lot of suffering and discover how to take the indulgence out of enjoyment. As Blake puts it so exquisitely 'to kiss a joy as it flies is to live in eternity's sunrise'. And we can do it – today.





25. The Knees! Taking The Suffering Out Of Pain (Endurance)

If you have not suffered a lot of physical pain in your life other than ordinary headaches and bumps, the body's capacity to offer pain can come as quite a surprise. Those who have sat in retreats know it is part of the course.

There are the physical pains that arise from the posture itself. Even those with a daily practice of an hour or so, still go through sore knees. And if the body is not in correct posture then pain in the neck or back arises. Correcting the posture can alleviate this and, in my experience, Zen and yoga understand best its importance. But knees! We simply have to wait till they get used to it. The important thing here is to sit on a chair and wait for the soreness to pass.

In terms of spiritual insight, throbbing knees are a great friend. First of all they teach us to develop patient endurance and the sensations are so loud problems with concentration dissolve. They also teach us that they are not me or mine. Whether we like it or not, want it or not, they will express their unsatisfactoriness.

Our usual reaction to pain is to get rid of it, as in take an aspirin. In meditation trying to clear pain out of aversion is a non-starter. We have pitted ourselves against an enemy that is much stronger than we are and using sheer force of will to 'overcome' pain often leads to damage. In my early Zen practice, I began to dislocate my knee. Others I know can no longer sit cross-legged because of knee damage. But let's not frighten ourselves. Let's be compassionate to the body. Frankly, so long as the posture is right, the only susceptible parts seem to be the knees – and here we are called to investigate pain. As soon as the pain overwhelms and the investigation cannot continue calmly, then move. The Buddha found suffering for suffering's sake, ignoble, unprofitable and – painful!

What is the exploration around physical pain? First, we are interested in the reaction of aversion. We observe the pain and the feelings of aversion towards it. The distinction here is that the pain belongs to the body; the noting of it as 'pain' belongs to the mind. The aversion that arises belongs to the mind as does the noting of aversion. Here we are distinguishing between pain and

suffering, what the Buddha called dukkha dukkhata, the suffering of ordinary pain. This distinction is important because it is suffering that liberation annihilates. The pain, natural to the body, may arise so long as we have a body. When the aversion begins to disappear a new relationship to pain emerges. We feel perfectly at ease and calm with it. This equanimity will prove to us that pain does not make us suffer – rather the mind with its attitudes does that.

Once this ease emerges we can dissect the pain to determine what qualities it is composed of. There may be a variety, usually around heat and pressure. As we do this we refine our noting – no longer ‘pain, pain’, but ‘tightness’, ‘prickliness’, ‘heat’ and so on. In this way we realise that pain is also a mental construct. It doesn’t actually exist. What does physically exist is just these sensations. When we experience pain like this, even the feeling of ‘painful’ disappears.

At this level of investigation, we begin to see impermanence very clearly. These various sensations truly arise and pass away moment after moment. They are nothing but a series of fleeting energies.

In these various ways, physical pain comes as a blessing – not that we should seek it.

So let’s then make the most of whatever pain or discomfort arises. Just today. That’s enough!





26. When The Storm Comes

When we practise vipassana, we open ourselves up to the deepest recesses of our hearts. We shouldn't be surprised, therefore, to find things that we never thought were there or things that we knew were there but had no idea how big they were. After all, for most of our lives we have been developing strategies to escape emotional discomfort. With vipassana, these are set aside. We say to the heart: 'Come on. Show me what you have!'

And, inevitably, what arrives first is the dukkha, the unresolved emotional states. They've waited impatiently and for a long time to express themselves, but we've held them down, kept them out of conscious awareness. We've either suppressed them with aversion and fear or ignored them by diving into a pastime or other delightful way to distract the mind.

So now that we are sitting, as it were, open-hearted, it may be that these unresolved emotions erupt like volcanoes and completely hijack us. Our thought patterns, images, fantasies sweep us up into a whirlwind and we think we've lost our minds. We've gone mad.

This can be very frightening, a living nightmare. These unwholesome states can range from uncontrollable grief to unforgivable guilt, from raging hatred to abject fear. At first we have to steady ourselves. Find a way of relaxing the system. Take time out. Go for a walk. Have a cup of tea. And during that time talk to ourselves. Reflect on the situation. Remind ourselves that this is all part and parcel of purifying the citta. Remind ourselves of the Buddha's psychology – the Wheel of Dependent Origination. Comfort ourselves with the knowledge that the Bodhisatta himself had to struggle with these demons – Mara and his hoards – before he could sit victorious beneath the Bodhi Tree. Remind ourselves constantly that all conditions pass away. Then when we've regained our courage and resolve to continue the process, we determine to go back to the cushion.

Now the real trick to getting the better of these states is to descend into the body, to their feeling content. Remember that whenever the mind wanders into fantasy, it is actually developing these states even though it was not our

conscious intention to do so. It's just the way an emotion finds relief or perhaps false release – by finding a way to express itself first in the mind with its amazing ability to create film-like scenarios and second, to deposit it all on an unsuspecting world through speech and action.

We have to intercept that process. That's why it is so important to note clearly what the mind is doing and return to the body, to sensations in the body caused by the emotional state. Right there in the body, these turbulences have a perfect route of escape. They can just blow themselves out and no harm is done – no matter how bad we feel. They tend to rise towards a crisis and then either disappear or slowly die away. All we have to do is acknowledge them, feel them, experience them. And by putting our attention on one of the Three Characteristics: their transient nature, how we are relating to them and how we are experiencing them as not me, not mine, we can detach ourselves from them and thereby increase our spiritual understanding.

And here's the wonder of it. The psychotherapy takes care of itself! The heart heals itself just as a cut finger mends itself.

So our commitment is to stay steady even within the greatest of storms, to tie ourselves to the mast of awareness. Let's then commit this day, just this one day, to developing this steadfast fearlessness in our awareness.





27. Sex, Romance And Celibacy

I'd be surprised if anyone passed through any retreat without being assailed at some point by erotic and romantic feelings and fantasies. Why should we expect otherwise when these two represent probably the most delightful of human experiences? On top of that, our culture is especially saturated with sex. Unfortunately, they take us off the Path, for the Path is one of renunciation.

Romance and sex, of course, are beautiful in themselves and obviously have a serious role to play in most lives. Indeed, a principal function of them is to help other beings be reborn into this human realm which the Buddha called the best place to achieve liberation. So within the context of procreation, these delights are made sacred. But they also play a role in a certain type of intimate relation.

On retreat, however, our task is to see how attached we are to these two mental states and how easily we are carried away in indulgent daydream. We must be vigilant to catch the first signs and stay within the body. Every time the habitual mind shoots off, it is unwittingly developing indulgence and attachment. So what to do?

First, stop looking around. We need to close our eyes to other retreatants. We need to be alone in a crowd and keep the attention inward as best we can. Should we find with a glance an attraction, acknowledge the danger. Resist getting caught up. Gently turn away, keeping the attention within bodily sensations.

The method taught by the Buddha in the *Discourse on How to Establish Right Mindfulness* to develop a more balanced relationship to the body, is to contemplate the undesirable parts. Erotic and romantic beauty is notoriously skin deep. Take the object of desire – for that's all it is – and imagine it without the skin. Or see the skeleton, even the digestive system. This is an immediate turn off.

When this practice is offered, the meditator fears losing sexual appetite. If only it were that easy for such desires do not leave us till we arrive at the third

stage of liberation, that of the non-returner. And for most of us that's a way off yet. These are meant as balancing acts. The exercise on the Repulsiveness of the Body is to put our sexual and romantic desires into perspective. We should not do this practice until instead of such pleasant desires we are overwhelmed with disgust

If the practice is done correctly as soon as an erotic image arises it transforms into an unpleasant image and they both fade away, for the unpleasant image drains the desire attached to the erotic image, yet does not itself increase. Should the unpleasant image continue to linger then all we need – as usual – is to turn away from the object and return to the breath. In this way we condition the mind to see the other side as soon as the erotic or romantic desires arise – like a cancelling out, and it's a very skilful practice on retreat.

When then should we allow erotic and romantic desire to manifest? Surely when we have seriously decided to look for a spouse or partner. If not, such desires fester in the mind. And what a loss of time and energy they are. This is where we might consider the benefits of celibacy. For the passive side of celibacy is that we stop indulging romantic and sexual desires.

The active side is to sublimate those desires into more creative wholesome activities such as art, voluntary work, the day job, a hobby and so on. The energy we devote to sex and romance is not labelled 'sex and romance'. It's just energy. It's up to us to use our life's energy in ways that lead us out of suffering into happiness and fulfilment.

To coin a phrase Churchill used for greatness, 'some are born celibate, some grow into celibacy and some have celibacy thrust upon them!' If you find you are without a partner and have no real desire to form a lasting relationship, then take this opportunity to sublimate your desires.

And the best thing you can do is – meditate and develop Right Mindfulness. Right now. Today.



28. Shame, Dread And Remorse

Shame, dread and remorse are the consequence of harmful actions. They are a second tier of mental states that arise out of the three roots – greed (meaning all forms of acquisitiveness), aversion (which is both hatred and fear) and, underpinning these two and always concurrent, delusion. These three mental states are universal, part of the package that comes with ignorance.

Shame is an early emotion, seemingly experienced by three year olds and perhaps even younger. It has to do with our self esteem, the way we see and judge ourselves and presume other people see us in the same way. So it is not just unwholesome deeds but social gaffes also that can be acutely embarrassing. A story concerning Sir Walter Raleigh is a good example. He was at the court of Queen Elizabeth before Her Majesty when he happened to fart. He disappeared from court for a whole year. Upon return the queen welcomed him back, assuring him: ‘We have forgot the fart.’

On a more serious note, I am reminded of a famous TV personality who in old age was caught shop lifting. The public humiliation was too much to bear and she committed suicide.

Shame is a nasty state to have to deal with, but deal with it we must and in the usual way, by coming off the mind with its thoughts and memories and into the heart/body, where we experience the emotional/sensation value and endure. Of course, it becomes insight practice when we can investigate the Three Characteristics there.

The knowledge of having done something unwholesome is guilt: I am guilty! Dread is the fear of consequences. And the law of kamma states definitely that as we sow so we reap. Of course, we should do what we can to limit the damage. If we have spoken out of turn and cruelly to a superior at work, it may cost us our job if we don’t put it right. But on retreat, we come face to face with the inner turmoil that guilt and dread can create. As always the mind is adept at building huge scenarios. But we must turn from the thinking, imagining proliferation and bear with the feeling tone. In all cases,

this is allowing the system to cool. When we settle into an equanimous, calm state we can see more clearly and often a solution arises.

There is also what we could call an existential guilt, that we are essentially bad. This may have been instilled through our Judeo-Christian upbringing. It is not the Buddha's understanding. He taught that we are essentially not-knowing of the way things really are and so we make mistakes about who or what we really are. This is our delusion. And all the unskilful, unvirtuous behaviour that follows is secondary. That is why when the heart is purified this not-knowing becomes the knowing, the Buddhho.

Whereas shame and dread fall into the category of aversion in the Five Hindrances, remorse has its own place along with restlessness. Unpleasant though it feels, remorse is a healing state, a coming to terms with the fullness of what we have done and the way we really are. It takes humility and sometimes a lot of courage to say sorry. We try to do what we can in our ordinary lives to apologise and make amends, but in the meditation hall it has to be gladly suffered. Of course, we may write a note to remember to put things right once we leave the retreat. But sometimes it's an old memory and we have lost contact with the person or they may have died, in which case we need to speak to them in our hearts and offer metta.

All this is part and parcel of the purification process that proceeds of its own accord. No need to 'do something'. Just observe, feel, experience. That's enough. And just today. That's enough too.





29. Laziness And Hierarchy

We don't normally think of ourselves as lazy. Our usual problem is too much energy. But if we really investigate the way we behave during the day, we will find there is much to be said for guarding against habits of laziness.

By laziness, I don't mean real conscious decisions to be lazy. If that were so, we would be more aware of them. And, of course, I'm taking for granted that we aren't making such decisions: 'I'm not going to do anything now. I'm just going to loll about the place and waste the time of day.' For most of us that would be so against our deeply ingrained Protestant ethic – work is good and you can tell those who are spiritually advanced by how much good they accomplish – that such thoughts arise rarely if at all. Such an attitude is definitely working for us so long as we define the good in a skilful way.

What I'm referring to is the habit of not caring for or not taking care of something we think is unimportant. We can make the error of placing the different practices we do into a hierarchy. Sitting is obviously the core of the practice and is very important indeed. Walking meditation is important, but it's only there to support the sitting. Eating? Well, I should try to be mindful. And all the other little activities of the day such as walking from the meditation place to the walking place, walking upstairs, using the bathroom – these are instrumental and in a sense get in the way of the real practice which is sitting. And so on.

This thinking can be corrosive for the practice since it means our effort is not constant. It keeps dropping. It is not a sustained input, but patchy. Every time we dip, we have to make that extra effort to get the effort to where we had it before. The effect on concentration is immediate. We end up feeling we're blowing up a balloon, letting some or all of the air out and then having to blow it up again.

If we are quick, we will catch the attitude that makes us behave like this. As soon as we are aware it, we need to acknowledge it clearly and decide to do the opposite.

One of those danger times may come after a sitting. We make a conscious decision to stop and then suddenly we find ourselves walking out of the meditation hall. Another is when we get ourselves a cup of tea. We make it with great attention and then sit down, only to wake up minutes later, the tea drunk and we haven't tasted a drop. No wonder – we've been planning that holiday again!

We say: 'Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.' How true! If we can bring our attention to those points of the day that seem insignificant, then the habit of continual mindfulness will be greatly supported.

So beware of taking time off. Don't be lazy now, says the Buddha, and be remorseful later.

Let's take his advice to heart. Let's devote this day to a real effort at a continual mindfulness. The old conditioning may get the better of us occasionally, but it won't be for lack of effort. At least we'll be liberated from those remorseful afterthoughts: 'If only I'd put more effort into the practice.' And berating ourselves: 'You'll never get anywhere behaving like this! You're useless.'

So that's our task. A gentle, persistent effort. Moment upon moment without a single break. Let's devote ourselves to that.





30. Beware Of Expectation

The self always wants to control the present *and* the future. It makes itself feel comfortable that way. If we know what's going to happen, we feel safe. Even if it is imminent death, at least we feel we'll be able to have some measure of control. But life, unfortunately, does not organise itself alongside our expectations. Even when it appears to, it is better to see it as serendipity – a fortunate meeting!

In spiritual practice, expectation is a dangerous poison. When we fail to get what we expect, we are disappointed, humiliated, depressed. It leads us to feel the practice is doing us no good or is not for us and so on. And when we do get what we expect, we can be assured it is a delusion, for whatever spiritual insight is, it is not within the realm of thought and imagination.

A friend of mine told me that when he first came to a meditation course, he thought it would be like all the other courses he had been on: you work hard on the course material and at the end you receive your certificate. When he joined a week-long vipassana retreat, he presumed he would have the experience of Nibbana at the end. It is possible, of course, but sadly didn't happen. He took quite a while to get over his disappointment. Then he began to realise that so-called 'spiritual attainments' cannot be 'attained' at all, but that all we can do is work on the conditions in which such insights might arise. And here, of course, is the genius of the Buddha's teaching. Yes, Nibbana is our goal, but our aim is simply to establish mindfulness.

Beware of expectation. It is not always apparent to us. So long as there is a self, expectation will lurk somewhere. Even though we may sit and recollect the uselessness of expectation, we should not be surprised to find it has crept into our practice. Subtle feelings of disappointment that express themselves as irritations are signs. Or fed-upness. Or wanting to seek distraction. Then there's boredom – a real sign that we have presumed. We must constantly take a weather check of our attitude. Through wise reflection we can keep correcting our view and undermine the self.

Should we still find ourselves going through the disappointment, then let that be our teacher. Acknowledge the suffering that expectation causes. Right here in our meditation we can see how it works against our better interests. And we will become aware of how it can corrupt our daily lives. To recognise our expectations of the work we do, of the people we know, of the society we live in – rarely will anything live up to our expectations. Whenever it does, we expect more so that in time the fall can be greater. Take, for example, the stock markets.

So let's gather ourselves around receiving the present moment in its fullness. If we can just see the way things really are and accept that, then the danger of being deluded is lessened. Every moment offers us the occasion to move spiritually. Why should we need expectation? There's the hope we live in. Hope arises out of our trust in the practice, the hope that we will one day be fully liberated. Hope is not expectation but expectation is hope with a date on it.

So let's devote ourselves to making this a day of moment-to-moment mindfulness with no expectations whatsoever. Just a continuous relaxed investigation of conditions as they arise and as they pass away.





31. Refuse To Be Annihilated

Like the Greek horse that so fooled the Trojans, dullness and lethargy come bearing false gifts. They tell us that we deserve a rest. We've worked too hard and a little power nap will do us the world of good. But all the time these sugary friends are in the payroll of Mara, the Great Seducer. For that is what Mara is, that tendency to seek happiness in the sensual world. And dozing is an inviting pastime.

But if we have had a good sleep and for those of a certain age who may have need of a small nap after lunch (the siesta has good science), then all feelings of dullness and lethargy must be seen for what they are – unwholesome conditionings.

Consider how many times we have taken to sleep on the couch through boredom or depression, seeking relief in oblivion! By and large it brings relief, but at a heavy cost for we use such sleep to suppress unwanted feelings.

Then there are those times when we indulge in sleep because it is so pleasant. How many Sundays or days in the garden or holidays on the beach have we delivered ourselves to its exquisite pleasure? In oblivion, there is no suffering,

But the Buddha is clear – oblivion does not constitute Nibbana. Indeed the problem with it is that it does not last and we often wake to the horrors we have been trying to escape.

All this behaviour has produced in us a great conditioning which arises in our practice as feelings of dullness in the mind and lethargy in the body. And I think it is often the case that we do not treat such conditions with the importance we give to states such as depression and anxiety. This is mainly, I suppose, because they are not painful. But they are two of our biggest hindrances, sapping us of all energy so that our practice withers away.

We must be vigilant and know the strategies that can prevent us being overcome by such tendencies. Lift the spine and make such feelings the object

to be observed. Still nodding off? Open the eyes and let light in, continuing to investigate the feelings. Still troubled? Stand and continue. Failing that, take the big, fat dog for a walk. And walk gently up and down, keeping that attention on the feelings in the body or in the head. We can be as awake within these conditions as we are when the citta is in a peaceful energetic state. Such states can hang around for days, but we still continue to work with them. We must refuse to be annihilated.

Then suddenly the energy turns and we are incredibly restless. This shows us that dullness and lethargy are but forces – forces that drag us down, inward, causing the citta to close down. Such energy can suddenly reverse and burst outward. Like the universe, we seem to have the capacity to create black holes and exploding stars within. Or, perhaps not so suddenly this heavy force irons itself out and we are sailing along. From this we can tell some of that conditioning has been exhausted. Whatever happens, let us congratulate ourselves that we did not fall for the lie. There is no permanent happiness to be found in sleep.

Forewarned is forearmed. So let us devote ourselves to this practice that liberates us from such deluded states. Just today. One day at a time. An unbroken thread of moment-to-moment fully awake mindfulness.





32. Feed The Need, Starve The Greed

A main technique the Buddha uses to awaken us is to ask us to deconstruct an event, to see its constituent parts and thereby undermine the notion of a self. We have an intimate attachment to the body, especially because it gives us pleasure and allows us to do what we want to do whether it's going for a walk or, in this instance, eating.

We have to eat and for the most part we eat three times a day with lots of snacks and a multitude of beverages. The Buddha, realising the dangers of indulgence especially for monastics, made a rule for them that only certain pick-me-ups could be eaten after noon. So this is the task when it comes to life's pleasures. It is not to destroy them in misguided mortification, believing they themselves are to blame for our suffering. Instead, it is to see the process of attaching, to realise that therein lie our problems. If we want to retain life's pleasures and not suffer the consequences, indulgence must be removed from our experience.

Eating offers a wonderful opportunity to deconstruct a pleasurable event, to see its constituent parts, to let the greed arise and pass away and to come to experience pleasure in a non-indulgent way. To do this we must be in contact with the body. So as we approach our food, be aware of hungry feelings. Some are the body's natural appetite but others are greed. As we take the food, let us remind ourselves we can always have seconds.

Once we have served ourselves and are sitting before the food, again contact the body for feelings of hunger and as the food reaches our tongue, stay with the explosion of delight. Just there on the three square centimetres of skin is all the pleasure to be had of food – chemicals reacting on touching, chemicals we experience as taste. Stay there. Chew slowly and contact as clearly as possible all the different tastes. Salty, sweet, sour, astringent, bitter, and so on. When this is clear after a few bites, open out and be aware of the state of mind that is accompanying them. Hopefully, it will be one of delight and satisfaction. That is the mental, emotional atmosphere we have created around the sensual taste of food. Make sure you can experience the difference

between these two forms of energy. Once that is clear, notice that pull, that magnet, the energy that wants us to get lost in the food. That's the greed! We need to be able to separate that out from the heart's delight. Of course, all the while there's the noting and if we fail to do that, the mind may chatter on about the food.

Perhaps we can separate all these different components fairly quickly or it may take us time to discern the different layers of our experience. No matter. The important thing is to keep rediscovering these elements. If we keep working in this way, we will stay in contact with the body and a time will come when the body signals fairly clearly that it has had enough. Here the overdrive may kick in – just that extra piece of cake! Greed displays its firework glory and of course we must resist. This is the practice of renunciation. We keep our attention on that feeling, fully feeling the greed, yet not obeying its demands. From this vantage point, we can investigate its properties. And because we are not indulging, the energy of greed will simply exhaust itself.

What then is the state of mind without greed? Can we tell the difference between the mental state of gratification that arises when we have sated a desire from the mental state of contentment when the mind is empty of desire. If we can do that then we are beginning to know the difference between being caught up in samsara and being in Nibbana, the state of non-compulsive desire.

So let's make that effort. The effort to maintain that continuous investigative awareness. Just today. That's enough.





33. Judging ... Judging ... Judging ...

When we have a self, we take a position – which aims to support the self. The self wants always to feel safe and, from that basis, collects objects and people to make it feel even more secure. These basic positions are the views and opinions in which we invest a lot of emotion because the self is so identified with them. This is the vicious circle that exists between *mana* (conceit), *ditthi* (view) and *tanha* (attachment).

The self delights in taking positions – mostly critical: ‘How could he do such a thing?’ ‘She shouldn’t be doing that.’ ‘This place isn’t quiet enough.’ Occasionally it praises: ‘She’s a good meditator.’ ‘He’s so good at keeping to the schedule.’ ‘The food here is wonderful.’ But we only praise when it suits the self.

Behind this lies self-judging: ‘I shouldn’t be thinking these thoughts. I am so bad. I am so judgmental.’ The conflict turns inward and before long we are caught up in a war with the world and a war with ourselves.

When we find ourselves getting hot in this way, we are not catching thoughts quickly enough. Or if we think we are, then we are not making that determination to avoid indulging them. Whenever we catch the mind judging, stop it in its tracks. Recognise it – judging. Acknowledge it – judging. And turn inward to the feeling, the *tanha*, which surrounds the mental activity. Stay with the feelings there, usually irritation. Feel its wish to launch into self-righteous thought. Wait for that desire to die down.

Sounds easy enough. But, as we know, it is difficult. The judgmental mind is one of our most exercised skills. With patience it will die down and after each dying, it is good practice to offer *metta* to the person or object that so upset this strict judge. And that definitely includes ourselves.

However, there is a judging that is not judgmental. Here we have the word *judicious*, meaning wise and sensible. Sometimes a person is doing what ought not to be done. Sometimes an institution might benefit greatly from a person’s experience. But to be *judicious* means to see the whole situation even from

the other person's or institution's point of view. To do that we must drop our own little opinion and see it in a wider perspective. These are the virtues we expect in a judge – not to be hijacked by a crowd baying for blood or duped by the clever arguments of lawyers.

So as always in the spiritual life, nothing is destroyed. Everything, once purified of the self, is put to the service of the Dhamma. We don't want to lose our ability to make judgments. But we do want to know how to make our judgments wise.

Vipassana, centred on the Three Characteristics, has a unique vantage point to see how the self manifests in all its forms. On retreat, where we hesitate before engaging in anything, we are ideally situated to pick up on this harmful habit and slowly undermine its power over us.

This is all part of our practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness. How important it is to develop this sort of awareness. When we really see this, we have no problem devoting ourselves to it. Just one day at a time. It's enough.





34. Fear, Fear ... Anxiety, Anxiety ...

Ours has been called the Age of Anxiety and it's fair to say that the emotions our modern society most raises in us are fear and anxiety. The speed and range at which technology, politics and society are changing is, I believe, new to history. And the economic system that is now beginning to dismantle itself has had little respect for community or environment. Many of us don't know if we'll have a job tomorrow and our secular and individualist and so relativist ethics have undermined the former general stability of society.

When fear and anxiety present themselves, we must first ask: 'Have they any foundation?' This isn't always easy to know, but at least we can undermine their power by considering what if ... What if I lost my job? What if my relationship broke up? What if I fell seriously ill? Our creative imagination can show us that it is not the end of the world, and a great deal of the unrealistic fear and anxiety created through the imagination evaporates.

We must continually remind ourselves that emotions do not have their root in events, but in the wrong view of self. When a fear or anxiety arises it will always seek to express and develop itself through some idea, some metaphor. If we persistently imagine we are sick, we can slowly turn ourselves into hypochondriacs.

It may be that these emotions are rooted in our childhood. But again, that root is not embedded in what has happened to us but rather in how we *reacted* to what happened to us. So the answer lies not in trawling through past events but right here and now in the presenting emotion as emotion. That's why in the *Discourse on How to Establish Mindfulness*, the Buddha expresses this by instructing us to see, understand and experience feelings in feelings, states of mind in states of mind. So as always we note the thinking mind, we note what it is doing, not caring for the subject matter. Fearing, fearing ... Anxious, anxious ... And then we turn away from the mind into the heart, into the body. We contact and feel the emotional value of those thoughts. In so doing, we give them the time and space to express and exhaust themselves.

When we turn on these feelings, fear arises. Indeed, we are afraid of fear. And such reactions whirl into panic. We lose it! If panic should set in, hold steady. Remember it is the fear of fear that is causing it. Breathe deeply. Put the attention on a part of the body that feels neutral. Wait for composure to return and access the fear again. If this fails, follow the example of the Buddha when he was still a Bodhisatta. When fear arose while doing walking meditation in the jungle, he did not stop. Slowly we will lose our fear of fear. We will feel more comfortable with those feelings. Remember it is upon our defilements that our virtues grow. What is courage other than the ability not to be moved by fear or anxiety?

Once calmed we can begin to observe and experience them at a more visceral level. The hot agitation of anxiety. The cold tightness of fear. The nausea. Going beyond the word, we see their simple sensation quality. At that level, the reaction of fear to both fear and anxiety disappears. We realise all fear is mind made.

Finally, since fear is the last resort of self, here we train ourselves to face the mother of all fears – the fear of death.

With this reflection on death, that sense of urgency may arise. A job to be done and life is short. So let's get on with it! Just this day, one day at time, devoted to this liberating practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





35. Envy And Jealousy

When it comes to envy and jealousy, I make a distinction. Envy is just wanting what another has – their car, their laptop and so on; or wanting to be like someone else – to be clever, beautiful, successful. Jealousy is the same, laced with a dislike, even a hatred of the person. In Shakespeare’s play *Othello*, these themes are explored to the point of murder.

Normally we are comfortable with accepting that envy arises, especially of the things people have, but jealousy is normally denied. It is too much for our pride and self-esteem. So skilled mindfulness is needed to catch this fleeting attitude which can flame outward for barely a moment.

If we have not accepted such attitudes, they will express themselves in wish-fulfilling daydreams in which everything, including cruel thoughts, is somehow justified. Every time this happens, the underlying attitudes of envy and jealousy are fortified. When we realise how destructive they can be to our relationships and indeed to our own hearts, we’ll want to do something about it. Envy can make us obsess about bettering the Joneses. Jealousy can make a cold heart even colder. So that effort is called for to note, recognise and acknowledge what is going on. Once identified as envy or jealousy, we return to the body and contact whatever feelings we can discern there. In this way, a conditioning exhausts itself. It is the process of purifying the heart.

As these states begin to dissipate, do not be surprised to find another layer they have concealed. Perhaps there’s that old feeling of unworthiness, or being treated unfairly and all the usual rubbish we find swilling around the heart. No matter, it’s all grist to the mill – to be noted, recognised, acknowledged, felt, experienced and understood.

While on retreat, as we wander around and catch people at their walking and sitting meditations, envy and jealousy can arise. Indeed a meditation centre is often a hot-house in which all our subterranean conditionings can sprout. Greet these states with that willingness to explore and endure. See them as friends – the enemy. Give them the time and space to express their grudges. That’s all they want to do.

The antidote is mudita, sympathetic joy. When such feelings die away, it is good practice to think of the person's good qualities, their achievements and their karmic good fortune. And wish that no harm comes to them and that they live in joy and continue to do so.

So with this Dhamma attitude, let us devote this day to the practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





36: Thank Heavens For Those Little Annoyances

Have you noticed those little moments of irritation? At times they may blow up into a full-time rage – but I’m thinking more of those little annoyances that crop up, sometimes all day.

We are settling into our meditation – and someone comes bustling into the hall late. So inconsiderate! We take a deep breath and settle down again. We slowly build up a good steady concentration – and someone coughs. Really, that is so annoying! Worse, we are about to perceive through the veil of ignorance into the depths of reality itself – and there’s a mighty sneeze. Surely that is the limit. I mean, don’t these ‘meditators’ know better?

When such little annoyances arise, we need to be quick to remind ourselves that no one can make us angry. Thank the ‘disturber’ with all our heart, because unknowingly, they are showing us where we are getting stuck. So long as we are deluded we will persistently fall into the error that what we are trying to create is a state of mind. Or worse that we are trying to have spiritual insight, believing such insights can only come with a particular state of mind.

But the fact is we are working to establish a level of consciousness. And by that we mean we are constantly rediscovering and working to make steady that position within us from which we can calmly observe and experience whatever arises within the psychophysical organism. In other words, we want to be aware of any sensation, feeling or thought that draws our attention. So if we are truly doing the practice properly, nothing should be able to ‘disturb’ us. For a so-called ‘disturbance’ is but another object to observe and experience.

Whenever irritation arises because something has ‘disturbed’ our meditation, we should be quick to acknowledge that we are getting tight around the practice. We are falling into some ‘ideal’ of how the practice should be, how people should behave, how a meditation hall should be run.

It’s those words – ‘should’, ‘ought to’. They are arising out of an ideal we have formed. From this tight position we try to control the world around us. If we are perceptive enough, we will probably catch ourselves doing it virtually

all the time. For it's not something that just happens in the meditation hall, but during other times too and, of course, in our daily lives.

We need to loosen up. Take a deep breath. Squeeze the tension out of the shoulders. Reflect on the practice of vipassana and what it is about. Acknowledge that it is this very attitude of 'should' and 'ought to' that is disturbing our practice.

We need to lighten up too, cultivate the ability to smile at ourselves when we get caught out like this. Or else just reflect on how when we fall into wrong practice we can end up with self-blame and self-doubt.

So abandoning all 'should's' and 'ought to's', let's devote this day to pellucid awareness of everything that arises and passes away that draws our attention. Just moment to moment through this one day. That's enough!





37: Restlessness

The causes of restlessness are dual. We live in a fast society and have to get things done. Pushing us is the craving for wealth, position and so on. This indulgence creates that energy within us that we feel as restlessness simply because now it has nowhere to go. Then there is the restlessness that results from our resisting and running away from whatever we are experiencing as unpleasant – boredom, worry, frustration.

There is an even deeper restlessness that comes from delusion of self. The self knows it is heading towards its own annihilation. Death looms slowly on the horizon. Fear of death pushes self to seek even harder to prove that it can live and it does so by seeking refuge in the pleasures and joys of life. Restlessness is the last of the Ten Fetters that travel with conceit. The fetters bind us to this existence. Only when the ‘I am’ has gone, can restlessness come to its final resting place. So, when we sit with restlessness we are also preparing ourselves for death. For at the closing of our lives, the self will get very agitated indeed and we need to be able to sit still, maintain our composure and pass through the experience of death wide awake, fully mindful. There is a case in Scripture where a monk, despairing of his practice, commits suicide – seemingly fully knowing and mindful. For when the Buddha is asked what realm he had been reborn into, he said he had become liberated, such is the power of mindfulness.

This whirlwind energy can come through the body or mind or both. When restlessness manifests in the mind, we seem unable to control it. The crazy thoughts and obsessive thinking won’t stop. If we pit ourselves against them, this wrong effort feeds that energy and we end up exhausted. So we must patiently note and acknowledge the thought and return to the body. Let’s remind ourselves that were we to do this all day, all week, the whole retreat, that’s the practice and it is good practice.

When restlessness manifests in the body, the strong impulse is to move. But that we must not do! Let the restlessness throw us off the seat rather than we should get up. It helps to move around the body, noting where the restlessness

is and where it isn't. Does the big toe feel restless? Or the end of the nose? Sometimes we can rest at these places to gather our composure and resolve, then return to feelings of restlessness.

When we work with restlessness, the energy can begin to manifest as an emotion such as anxiety, anger, guilt and so on. Or it may transform into such sensations as heat and pressure. Since it is the other side of the coin to dullness and lethargy, we may one minute feel restless and the next fall asleep. We support restlessness should we move for relief's sake or resist it by getting tight around it. So again all we need do is sit up, sit still and experience whatever is manifesting. It's all part of the course. Our job, then, is to let restlessness do what it wants. Just like any storm, it will blow itself out once supporting conditions go.

Should we decide to do walking meditation, it is best not to force ourselves to do intensive slow walking, but rather walk up and down at a gentle pace all the while staying in touch with the agitation. We must not make the mistake of walking it off. Go for a run. That just spins the whirlwind. We will feel relieved by giving the energy an outlet, but we have in fact indulged it and it will return – with a vengeance.

So, realising how deep this restlessness goes within us, let us raise that steely determination – in a gentle way! And let us devote ourselves to this practice. Just one day of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





38: Boredom ... Boredom ... Boredom ...

After his awakening, the Buddha was still stalked by Mara. The faint conditionings of the past continued to lurk and it took seven years for them to finally die away completely.

When Mara realised his power to tease the Buddha had gone, he gave up. He recalled his three daughters, whom he had sent to tempt him, Sensual Desire, Sexual Desire and Boredom. They pleaded with their father to give them more time but Mara replied it was useless: ‘The Buddha sees me! The Buddha sees me!’

On retreat when we go into an atmosphere of sensory deprivation, where there are no longer the usual enticements of a busy life, the mind can go a little berserk. It chases around looking for something to get excited about. As we keep training the attention to stay with the breath, the mood turns to boredom. After all what could be less exciting than watching the breath?

That’s when we understand why Mara sent his daughter, Boredom, for it is simply the obverse to excitement. The more excited we become, the more the potential for boredom grows. Since all life’s pleasure and joys have an inbuilt redundancy, repetition is experienced as ‘been there, seen that, done it, got the T-shirt’. Excitement persistently seeks the new and the latest. When it finds no satisfaction, it becomes boredom.

The meditator not sharp enough to catch its first stirring might mistake it for tiredness. But worse they might agree with it and say to themselves: ‘Yes, I must find something interesting to motivate me.’ At that moment, they fall into the lap of Mara.

The search is on for some interesting meditation object. If the abdomen is boring, then why not try the nose? Or touch points. Why not open up to the great here and now and stand within the all? No, perhaps a concentration exercise. Counting the breath. Or metta. That’s it! Loving kindness will cure it. After doing the rounds and each time, ‘it gets boring’, despair and doubt may arise. And the meditator gives up and goes for a cup of tea or a walk. But

even that won't satisfy the lure of excitement. So the furtive mobile call. The tempting conversation. Before they know it, they are packing!

Boredom is a liar. It tells us that all we need is a little change, something else, something other. After all, variety is the spice of life, of vipassana! And so we fail to investigate boredom itself. Just sitting there amid the heavy, dark, sometimes despairing feelings of boredom. Despairing because if indeed the pleasures and joys of life cannot deliver, then what? And when we cannot be satisfied by them, then there is this sameness, tedium, monotony, dreariness, deadliness – boredom.

Yet once we've seen through the lie, we turn on boredom itself. What is it? What are the feelings and sensations involved? What is the dialogue? Just feeling, listening and giving it the space to express itself cause it to fade away. Now that was interesting!

Then back to the meditation object. Boredom arises again. Again boredom is the object to investigate. Slowly we come to realise that the path out of boredom is that which it most dreads – repetition. Keep on keeping on with patience and diligence. After all, this was the final exhortation of the Buddha.

So let's do just that. Moment to moment. Dogged perseverance.





39: Wondering And Doubt

There is doubt and there is doubt. Honest doubt is saying: ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I’m not sure’ – especially when a part of us thinks it does. This is the wondering of the philosopher – the right attitude which will make us look and investigate again and again, until we can say through our own personal experience: ‘Yes. I know. Yes, I am sure.’

But doubt as a hindrance is a lack of confidence which prevents us from this investigation or from making a choice. It comes in all walks of life: should I take this job? Is this the right person to marry? Of course, these may also be true, honest questions, but when they keep stopping us from making a decision then there is cause to worry, because this sort of doubt undermines our life and we can become very stuck. At worst this sceptical doubt can lead to meaninglessness and despair. In the spiritual life it is equally pernicious. A person suffering from this sceptical doubt never gets down to business.

The cause of sceptical doubt lies in fear: fear of being fooled, fear of failure, fear of commitment – especially any long-term commitment – again in all walks of life. And it manifests most obviously as a lack of trust, a lack of confidence. If this isn’t acknowledged, such doubt is suppressed and manifests in such defence mechanisms as boredom, laziness ‘not bothering’ and even aversion.

In the spiritual life it shows up in three ways: a lack of trust in Buddhadhamma (the teachings of the Buddha), in the teacher and in oneself. The first of these can be undermined by reading and discussing the teachings. Remember, we don’t have to ‘believe’ a word of it. All teachings are pointers to our own personal experience through practice. This the Buddha makes clear in the often alluded to *Kalama Sutta* where he tells the Kalamas not to believe anything because it was the oral tradition, lineage of teaching, hearsay, scriptures and so on, until they came to know for themselves what was wholesome or unwholesome.

Doubt in the teacher is also a case of not ‘believing’ in what the teacher is asking us to do, but in trying it out. Then we’ll know by our own personal experience whether their instructions are right for us or not. We shouldn’t turn

our teachers into ‘gurus’.

Doubt in oneself is probably the most common and the cause may also be an inverted conceit. Remember the Buddha taught three conceits: the usual ‘I am better’, the more subtle ‘I am equal’ which translates as ‘We are better/worse’ for this conceit takes on a group identity; and the inverted conceit, ‘I am worse’: ‘Everyone else can meditate, can make progress – but not me.’ We need to be careful not to believe this internal dialogue, but to use it to get in touch with our feelings about ourselves.

It’s important also to undermine these self-defeating attitudes with contemplating the universality of the Dhamma. All beings are irrevocably moving towards awakening. Indeed there are mistakes to be made, hell realms to suffer, heavenly realms to delay our progress, but eventually, all beings seek escape from suffering – and they will find it. That includes – me.

So taking this to heart, should we be hounded by self-doubt or any other doubt, let’s see them as another manifestation of Mara, the defilements. And like the Bodhisatta, assailed by the Great Doubt beneath the Bodhi Tree, call upon the Earth Goddess, the ground of our true nature, to witness our right to the happiness and freedom of Nibbana. He didn’t move. He persevered.

Let’s persevere and devote this day to our own liberation.





40: Delicious ... Delicious ... Delicious ...

When the Buddha in the Second Noble Truth tells us that desire is the cause of suffering, he talks of a craving, a persistent seeking to slake its thirst for sensual pleasure. By sensual he meant not only the five senses, but also the sixth sense of the citta itself. So we include not only bodily delicious experiences, but also those to do with heart and mind.

First, we must acknowledge that such delight is in itself natural to the world, is part of our heritage as human beings and is good and beautiful in itself. We need to remind ourselves that what goes wrong is our relationship to such delightful experiences.

Let us centre on romance and eroticism. (You'll notice I don't talk about lust. Lust is our relationship to the erotic.) In the happiest of intimate sexual relationships, these two factors play their role of expressing this intimacy and deepening it and often they produce a child. Running at a deeper layer is love. When love is confused with sex or romance, then the relationship runs into trouble for neither can bring deep satisfaction. Remember that love in this sense is not an emotion, but an attitude: two people have made an act of will to share their lives.

When we come on retreat we take a vow of chastity. We become celibate. In so doing we are acknowledging that true happiness cannot be found in erotic or romantic behaviour. But, of course, our conditioning doesn't know that. We are surprised at how powerful lustful fantasies and romantic tales are and how they fill the hours of meditation. But we should not be so surprised for, I think you will agree, these are the most delightful sensual experiences we can have as human beings.

The more delightful the object, the more awake must we remain. The greater has to be our vigilance. As soon as we wake from the fantasy, we need to note and acknowledge – lust, lust; romance, romance. Be careful not to use the noting to get rid of these fantasies. It is a case simply of acknowledging. Then we return to the body and get in touch with physical or emotional feelings and sensations. We stay right there, feeling their fabric, investigating the Three Characteristics. As they die away, so the thoughts will stop.

If we fail to be vigilant, the mind will run away and we will have to struggle to regain our steadiness in meditation. Every time the mind unwittingly rushes off, an element of empowerment is there. Some will-power has entered the action and is reinforcing that conditioning.

After we have settled into a retreat and our feeling of being present grows and grows and we become increasingly still and concentrated, we may also fall into over-confidence. We think the Spiritual Faculties are established. This is a dangerous time for if we allow the mind to slip into fantasy, the power of our concentration will support it and really take us for a ride.

So keeping in mind the danger of indulgence, lifting our wholesome desire to investigate, let us devote ourselves to the practice of mindfulness for the whole day. Just today. That's enough.





41: Pain ... Pain ... Pain ...

Pain is a pain and a part of our nature. It is also a godsend – how else could we know there was something wrong with the body or in the body? And here we have the two types of pain that arise for us: that which comes from the body itself and that which is the mind’s turbulences in the body. We’ll deal here with ‘just’ physical pain.

Pain from our sitting posture may tell us one of two things: the body isn’t used to sitting this way and we need to get used to it; or that our posture is not good and will do harm. Either way we need to acknowledge this and make sure we are not over-stressing the body in any way.

Even so this is a good time for us to investigate the phenomenon of pain. What is pain? We know we don’t like it and that we are afraid of it. So that’s the first thing to make very clear to ourselves – our relationship to pain. When it arises, that aversion or fear has to be noted, clearly acknowledged and experienced until it passes away. Only when such reactions lessen or disappear can we really begin to investigate pain as such.

Once we are steady enough to sit unmoving with pain – and it doesn’t have to be severe – we can approach it, get into it, see what it’s made up of. We will then be surprised to find that the definition of unpleasant, unlikeable, painful begins to disappear. Instead of feelings of pain or discomfort, we begin to experience just tightness and/or just heat or some such sensations. All sorts of sensations co-operate to create a feeling of pain. But the important thing to notice and acknowledge is that when we experience ‘pain’ in this way, there is no suffering. We must keep reminding ourselves of this. Pain as such is not what the Buddha refers to as *dukkha* in the First Noble Truth of Suffering. The suffering in pain is our relationship to it.

There is a famous simile. The Buddha says that even if bandits were to come and saw us limb from limb with a double-handed saw and we felt any anger or hatred, then we would not be following his teachings. Tall order! But as we begin to see pain by way of sensations, we can glimpse how it might be that we could experience such pain without hatred or fear. And the happy by-product of such practice is patience and forbearance.

The danger in this approach is that we might develop a macho attitude to pain, for example ‘I am bigger than pain’. As far as I am concerned, as soon as I have stopped learning from pain or as soon as I can no longer maintain my equanimity, then I know it’s time to move. Here, in the moving, there is more to be learnt. Having made clear to ourselves our intention to move, we need to move slowly, very slowly, to see how the feeling changes from unpleasant to pleasant. And how the heart moves from disquiet to peacefulness. We need to separate these two processes and realise that they have different centres – the one coming from the body, the other from the citta. And we need to see how the one arises dependent on the other.

So physical pain has a lot to teach us and there is this small advantage: concentration is not a problem. Unfortunately, one-pointedness built up on such a loud object is not very strong. For strong concentration we need more neutral objects such as the breath.

So seeing pain as but another helper on the road to liberation, let us devote ourselves to the task in hand. Just today, one day, of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





42: Shhh ...

Meditation centres in the West tend to be so silent you can hear a pin drop. In the East, it's the opposite. The atmosphere is full of sound. In the country it's the wild life and in the town it's the incessant traffic or – dogs barking loudly! Interestingly, as I saw it, sounds are only a problem in the West.

There's no such thing as perfect silence anywhere on earth, no matter what we think. In fact, it seems the note throughout the universe is a B flat some octaves below our hearing – 'twas always my favourite note! So the more quickly we accept that zero sound is non-existent the more quickly we develop an attitude that allows us to maintain equanimity. Luckily in English we have three words that show us our relationship to sound: music, noise and sound.

The word sound itself is neutral, telling us that stimuli, concerned with hearing, are being received. We would normally have to define the sound with an adjective –beautiful or terrible. When the sound is beautiful, it's music to our ears. When it's not, we call it noise. There is music, noise and then there are neutral sounds. These are not the problem. The problem as always is our relationship to them: liking music, disliking noise, ignoring neutral sounds. The one we indulge. The second we reject. The third we are simply not aware of. Hence some form and some degree of dissatisfaction arise. In our meditation, we need to let go of these attachments. We welcome beautiful sounds such as bird song, but to see how we want to indulge and how indulgence always has a 'hangover'. We welcome so-called disturbing noises. They show up how we often want things to be different, want everything to be 'my way'. We brighten our minds to be aware of neutral sounds and see their transient nature. When all is very still and equanimous, we might become aware of the high pitch sound from the body's electrical system, even the swish of blood pumping through the ears.

Seeing sounds as just another object to investigate can be a blessing in daily life – especially with noisy neighbours. Of course, there is a limit to what we should accept of next-door's behaviour, but sometimes the walls or the floor above just aren't thick enough to stop the mumble of a TV programme. The aversion we feel which wants to annihilate the sound paradoxically nails

our ears to the wall or ceiling! But if we then remember the meditation hall practice of just hearing and continue to put our attention on what we are doing, the noise disappears. It folds into the other white noise that surrounds us.

Sounds, therefore, present to us the possibilities of insight. We can investigate the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness by seeing how we relate to sound as noise or not hearing the sounds we want. I remember feeling a disappointment and even a slight fear about the meaning of it when I woke one morning at Pian Dei Ciliegi, a meditation centre where I teach in Italy, for there were no birds because of the long drought and so no early morning chorus. We can investigate the characteristic of impermanence by experiencing sounds as process. We can investigate the characteristic of not-self by seeing the process of hearing as arising out of a set of conditions. At the deepest level we may see there is only the hearing and no person as such who is hearing! In fact, it is possible to experience the first knocking of airwaves on the ear drum.

It was while listening to the crackling of bread baking in the oven that a laywoman intuited the quality of transience and so broke through the delusion of self to become a stream-entrant. A good exercise is to choose a period of time when you give all your attention to what you hear. Just listening. That would be enough. Just for today.





43: Transformation Not Destruction

When reading certain writers who discuss killing the kilesa, the defilements, we might believe we are in the business of destruction – which can shift us into an aggressive attitude.

In the scriptures, the Buddha is accused of teaching annihilation theory because of his understanding of not-self. The only things to be annihilated are greed, aversion and delusion, he says.

But in our practice we find that if our attitude is one of not wanting defilements to be around, or seeing them as enemies, then we are into struggle. That struggle contains an element of aversion and so unwittingly we are creating even more kilesa!

On the other hand when we make friends with our defilements (as in love your enemies) our attitude is radically different. Indeed we greet them as long lost friends. ‘Come in,’ we say. ‘Let’s look at you. Now what have you to say for yourself today?’ We sit listening and feeling and patiently bearing their tales: this anxiety and that worry; this upset and that let-down; this frustration and that craving; this sadness and that guilt. In fact, the whole gamut of human misery.

Of course, we don’t indulge their fantasies, but remain steadfast at the door of feeling and sensation so that we can experience their rawness. After all what is an emotion at root but a turbulence of feeling and sensation? That’s all it is. But once it has a story, it has an ‘I’. Once personalised, feelings become monsters. Perhaps rather than ‘say for yourself’, we should ask: ‘So what have you to “feel for yourself” today?’

Nor are we concerned with origins, with why they are there or where they have come from. That plays right into their hands. The Buddha’s metaphor was of a soldier shot by an arrow. When people came to remove it and bandage the wound, he wouldn’t let them do so until he knew who had made the arrow, who had fired it and so on.

Our concern is to investigate defilements from one of the three vantage points. We want to be sure of their impermanent, changing nature; of their insubstantiality, lack of real existence; and how we relate to them, our reactions of indulging and aversion or wanting not to acknowledge them, ignoring them. In this way these very defilements become our teachers.

Then we see that they exhaust themselves, they evanesce, fade away. But what has happened to that energy? Is it lost? Far from it. It is now released from its attachment to an unwholesome attitude and so can be put to the service of a wholesome attitude. This is why Right Attitude, the second of the Noble Eightfold Path, is described as transforming selfishness into generosity, hatred into love and cruelty into compassion. Similarly with our unskillful habits – they will be transformed into their opposite virtue.

So nothing is lost. Nothing is destroyed save phantasms. Everything is transformed.

And all through this simple practice of mindfulness. Just being attentive to whatever arises and passes away that draws our attention within the field of awareness. So let's devote ourselves to that today. One day of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





44: Attachment

Attachment is the love excluded from metta, goodwill. Our relationships can assail us while on retreat and indeed in daily life. So we need to get 'love' in its proper perspective.

Whether our attachments are between parent and child and vice versa, between family members and friends, what we need to grasp is that the real love we have for them has a warp in it. That warp says, what's in it for me. It is often an unspoken need. The other is filling a gap in one's citta. And, hard though it is to accept, it turns the loved one into an object. It may be that children are there to fulfil the parents' dreams. Children may fail to grow up and become independent then later project this onto their spouses and partners. Friends cling out of fear of loneliness or some other need.

When we are on retreat, especially a long one, these attachments can arise strongly. Although I have talked about the positive side, remember that attachments can be negative too: wishing a grown child to get a life and stop asking for money; hating one's duty to look after one's ageing parents; angry and frustrated with a friend who didn't help when asked.

Once we wake up to this sort of behaviour, we mustn't beat ourselves up and find ourselves wracked by guilt. At ordinary levels, attachments are 'natural' because we have a self. So long as the self persists, there will be attachment. It's not evil in the sense of moral law. For example, the attachment a mother has to her child could never be considered 'evil'. Most actions arising from attachments are misguided efforts to do good.

The important thing is to become aware when attachment is manifesting. To be aware when we are acting from that position. On retreat when memories overwhelm us – old worn-out arguments and tattered worries sputter on, this is the time to see them as manifestations of attachments. As always we come off the fantasy and sit with the feeling tone. Then there may be a moment of reflection and an acknowledgement that when we behave like this, it is manifesting attachment. When we move out of that position the person becomes an object – which does neither of us any good.

The antidote, no surprise, is metta. Metta puts ‘the other’ first. It wants to know where the other person is coming from. The Buddha, when approached by a questioner, invariably asked them what they thought about their own question. Knowing their position meant he could offer a critique and then lead them to a truer understanding. Metta does not impose our view or our desires on the other. Metta experiences itself more as companionship, wise elderly or wise equal depending on the relationship.

This ability to step into another’s shoes, to see the world from their perspective and to offer comment and advice when called on is for me the key to true friendship. A companionship that can grow more trusting with each contact whether with children or fellow adults.

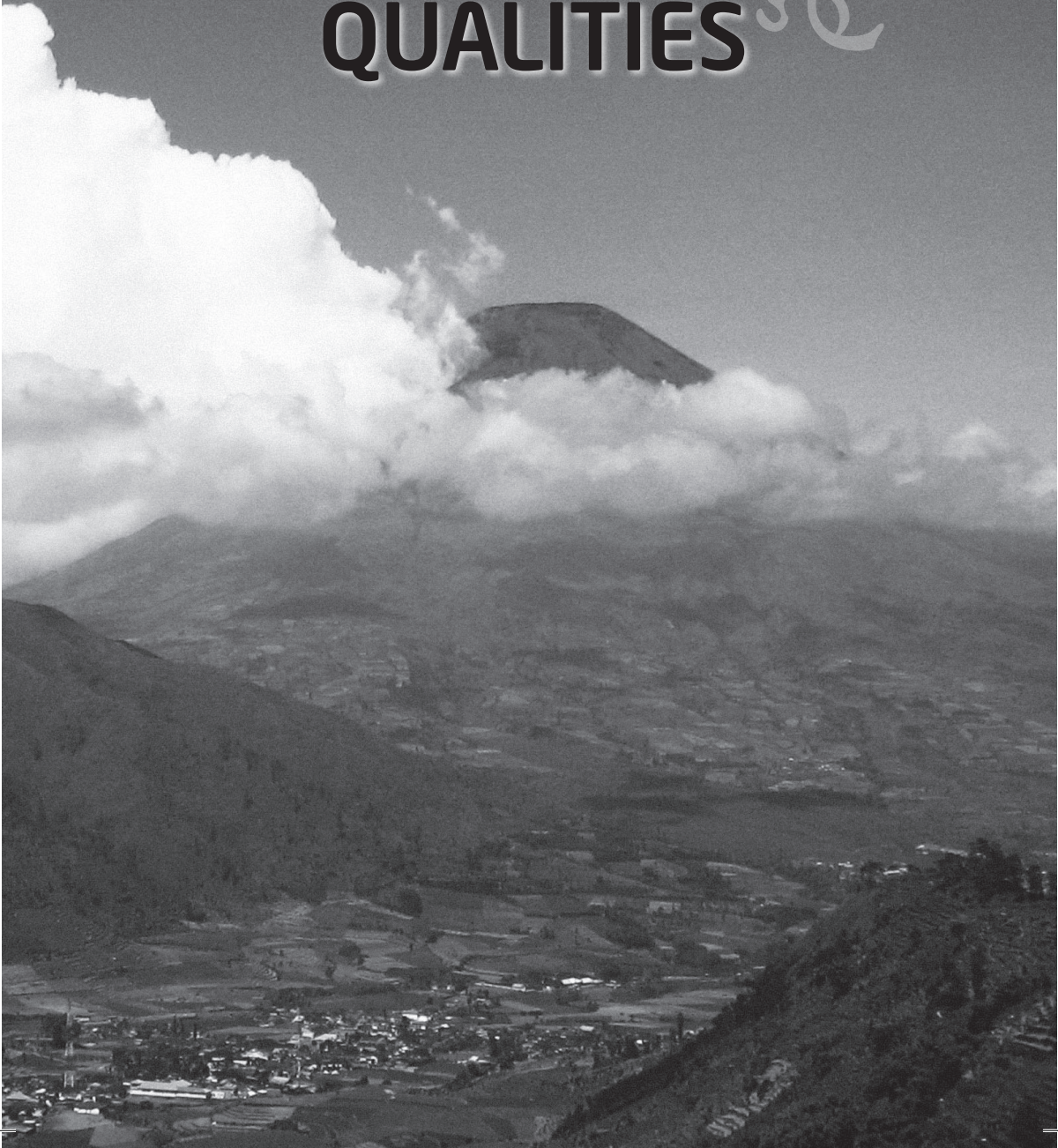
In this, vipassana excels. It makes us see these attachments in the very fantasies of the mind. Once we are aware of this, we take it with us into the world of relationships. Of course, when we change, lo and behold, the other changes too. Such is the mechanism of inter-relationship – everything arises dependent on something else.

This is another very good reason why we should devote this day to the practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





DEVELOPING WHOLESOME QUALITIES





45. Sati: Awareness

If I was to encapsulate the Buddha's entire teaching in one word, that word would have to be *sati*. *Sati* has its root meaning in remembrance, but the Buddha uses it to mean a moment-to-moment remembering, a continuous awareness, mindfulness, an unbroken act of knowing. It has been translated in many ways: attention, being in the moment, being present to whatever is happening, attentiveness and so on. But whatever word we use, we shall never capture the essence of it. The only way to do that is by personal experience through practice.

It's the simplicity of it that foxes us most. In the sitting, we just observe. We just look, just hear, just feel. Sometimes a touchstone is useful – a memory or occasion that reminds us of the simplicity of the practice.

One simple exercise is to look into the palm of the hand, not for fortune telling, of course, but to get the idea of what it is to look. By repeating a simple word such as 'looking', we can stop the mind from thinking *about* what it is seeing. And then just notice what the eye is perceiving. When we go outside and look at a leaf or flower or even a stone, look in the same way. We may have the impression that the leaf, flower or stone, is disclosing itself to us. All we are doing is watching. We can look at clouds like this, watch them pass and change shape.

Similarly, we can contact this simple awareness through hearing. Just listen to the sounds in the room or outside. By repeating a simple word such as 'hearing', we stop the mind thinking *about* the sounds. When our attention is on sounds alone, it's as if the world is disclosing its musical qualities to us.

So we have to make a distinction between looking *at* and looking *for*, between hearing/listening and listening out for something. Whenever our purpose is other than just looking, just hearing, then we are getting in the way. This 'just looking' has been called choiceless awareness. In other words, we are not choosing what to experience. Instead we are entirely open to what is happening.

The closest image I have is that of a very young child, less than seven years old. Their enrapture is visible. Thinking has stopped. Their eyes are fixed on the object. The jaw drops and hangs loose. Adults think they look gormless and often tell them to close their mouths and so ruin the whole experience for the child. For the mouth and thought are intimately connected. That's why when we sit, our lips are together but the teeth are apart. The jaw should be relaxed.

The clearest explanation of the practice of sati is described best in the *Discourse on How to Establish Right Awareness*. This was delivered to the lay people of a town called Kurusadhamma. This is significant, because it doesn't entail the development of jhana, absorption meditation. Not everyone can develop the jhana – it takes most people a long and sustained effort, the sort of time most lay people don't have. So the *Discourse* begins with the words – ekayano maggo: 'This is the direct path.' In other words, it's the simplest and most straightforward. All we have to do, insists the Buddha, is establish moment-to-moment mindfulness.

So let's do just that. Let's devote this day, one day at a time, to devoting ourselves to establishing a moment-to-moment attentiveness.





46. Panya: Intuitive Intelligence

There is within us that ability – or power – to see things as they really are. A regular phrase in the scriptures is to ‘see and understand the way things really are’ or, perhaps a closer translation, ‘the way things have come to be’ – nyanadassana yathabhutam. This simply means to see the Three Characteristics of Existence – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self.

But what is this ability, this intuitive intelligence – panya? Is it different from sati awareness? Or is it the same?

When we place our attention on an object, that’s looking – just looking, just observing, just experiencing. Within that looking lie the abilities to see and understand. But these are really the same faculty in two modes – the first passive and receptive, the second active and perceptive. The one encompasses the present level of Right Understanding and the second is that spark within it that extends that understanding. In other words, one is our wisdom and the other our intuitive intelligence. To separate them is a way of pointing to two different functions of the same quality within us. This is what in later traditions of Buddhism is referred to as our Buddha nature.

The ability to see, however, won’t develop without the intent to do so. It is like everything else within conditions. It has to be exercised. We cannot have insight just for the wanting otherwise we would all be immediately awakened just sitting here and desiring it. The conditions for insight to arise must be there and that is what we can develop. We can create the conditions so that this panya, this intuitive intelligence, can spark and perceive the way things really are.

The first condition is to be attentive. That’s the establishment of awareness, sati. The second is to raise that sense of curiosity, wanting to see, wanting to know. Otherwise the awareness will be sterile. It can sit very quietly and peacefully, thank you very much. And please don’t disturb my wonderful sitting! But nothing will ever happen. We’ve got to have the intention to see the Three Characteristics. That’s why the Buddha says that after we have established a basic contact with the breath, knowing its feeling and movement,

we then need to place the focus of our attention on the quality of transience. Only after this when we become concentrated into the present moment will awareness and intuitive intelligence, *sati-panya*, be strong enough to make insight.

These insights are not cataclysmic, world shaking, mind boggling experiences. It may be that on occasion, a meditator may have quite an extraordinary vision of the way things are, but for most of us it is just a gentle, slow turning within consciousness. Our understanding, say of *anicca* (impermanence), simply gets deeper and deeper, more and more refined.

So our task then is to train ourselves to be attentive and to look with a desire to see clearly. That's enough. 'Trying to have an insight' is not what it's about. Just look with interest, with curiosity. The seeing will arise naturally. That's what the Buddha tells us. First we have to look and then we see. Unless we look, we won't see. Just be diligent in establishing moment-to-moment mindfulness and the rest will follow naturally.

So let's commit ourselves to that. Just today. This one day. A 101 per cent devotion to a day of mindfulness.





47. Interest and Investigation of the Dhamma

Piti, one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, is translated as joy. The same word is used for the blissful states of jhana, the absorption meditations. Piti refers to the joy of investigation and is best translated as interest. To be interested in something is to be involved in it. And with this interest we don't have a problem with concentration, for instance work we really enjoy or a hobby or an avocation.

My introduction to vipassana and my continued involvement in it was through the Burmese teachers, especially Sayadaw U Janaka. The stress was on continuous mindfulness, concentration and effort. Try harder! It works for some, but for most it undermines their practice. And the reason is that we Westerners have enough if not too much effort. It's a qualified gift from a society bent on achievement. I say qualified because it is so attached to achieving. But the energy itself is what we need to meditate. When this attitude is put to 'gaining' the vipassana insight knowledges, then more often than not it leads to spiritual exhaustion, a sense of failure, self-doubt and at worse leaving the practice and the Dhamma altogether.

This can also happen with interest if our sense of investigation has this achieving attached to it, an expectation of breakthrough. For this means that all the time we are looking, we are looking *for* something. And that obviously gets in the way of seeing things as *they* are. Just observe how we enter a place for the first time, say a café, to meet someone. Our attention is focused on seeing our friend. We scan the area and everything that our eyes see is ignored. If we had to leave the place fairly quickly, we would probably find it hard to describe that particular café.

So to raise the pure interest we need, it's good practice to remind ourselves before a sit and even during a sit or walking period what it is we are actually doing. We are observing, feeling and experiencing anything which arises within the field of awareness that draws our attention. That's it! We are not 'trying' to see anything. We are not 'trying' to have an insight.

Find an image for yourself which reminds you of this Right Awareness imbued with interest. I have a bird feeder near my window and I watch the birds feeding. At first I was teaching myself to recognise the different birds that visited. After a while I came to know the visitors so I could let the intellect rest. I began just to watch them feed – for no reason whatsoever. I had no intention of writing a book about birds or making a photo album. There is now just the joy of watching these light creatures flitting to and from the feeder. After watching like this, a reflection usually follows: ‘The bottom of the Great Spotted Woodpecker really is red’; ‘The Nuthatch seems to feel more comfortable upside down.’ This tells me that even though while I’m ‘just watching’ there are no thoughts. When ‘just watching’ stops, the intuitive intelligence tells itself what it has seen. And of course it has to use the intellect.

So it is with vipassana. We enter into the process with the conscious intention of seeing the Three Characteristics – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. We then just observe, feel, experience whatever offers itself to this intuitive knowing. When we stop, there will almost invariably be some reflection. Each reflection is a small turning in the way we see and understand things. Each turning is a turning towards liberation.

So let’s raise the interest and just watch, just feel, just experience. Just today!





48. Mudita: Sympathetic Joy

Mudita – sympathetic or reciprocal joy – is most often defined as rejoicing in another’s good fortune, good qualities, success. Unlike metta – loving kindness, which classically is always offered to oneself first – it is hardly ever mentioned that mudita can also be offered to oneself. And there is much to rejoice about!

Consider how fortunate we are to be healthy enough to practise. How fortunate it is to have the financial wherewithal. How wonderful it is to have this time to devote to our practice. How fortunate we are to have spiritual friends who support our practice. It is support enough just to be there practising with us. Then there is this centre with all the people working here. Not so long ago, maybe thirty or so years, there were no centres in this country. Let’s not forget that we also have teachers to guide us.

So we have much to rejoice in and when we bring these things to mind, it lifts our hearts. This attitude makes us want to take advantage of our good fortune. Such contemplation is especially useful when we are down, feeling low, with little energy.

What about rejoicing in ourselves? We are doing the practice! Isn’t that something to be joyful about? Of course, the practice is no easy thing. At times it is downright horrible, but it’s all part of the course that leads us out of suffering. We are engaged in a process of healing. There will be an end – a glorious moment for us, when all our work is done. Completed. Finished. There will be nothing more to do. We enter that continuous state of Nibbanic happiness. That’s the merit, punya, we will receive at the end of all this blood, sweat and tears. It’s worth working for. Here we are on that very path. Surely, we should rejoice!

So at the end of the day, especially a hard day, don’t look back at the awfulness only. Let’s remind ourselves that we got through it. Congratulations! Well done! An achievement worthy of praise. We should rest in that quiet joy of having done what we could.

It may be that we remember times when we were lazy, when we let go of the practice. It happens. We accept that there will be kammic consequences. Fine! But all in all we kept at it. It's a case of seeing the proverbial bottle as half full not half empty!

We shouldn't be afraid to do this, afraid we may be indulging ourselves and falling into the error of conceit. Those dangers, of course, are always there. But to reflect like this, to lift our hearts and develop in ourselves an appreciation for our practice, goes a long way to ridding us of the criticising mind. Let's counter the judging that tells us we should have done better, we're not good enough, we're useless.

So there is a place every day for a little rejoicing, a rejoicing in one's own good fortune and good work. And when we practise this – even in ordinary daily life – it comes so naturally to rejoice in the good fortune and good qualities of others.

So, let's fill our hearts with this quiet joy and commit ourselves to this day. One day at a time. It's enough. A day devoted entirely to establishing moment-to-moment mindfulness.





49. Equanimity: Upekkha

Equanimity – not a word we come across very often. As a Factor of Enlightenment, though, equanimity is the necessary support to clear comprehension and discriminative inquiry so we can see things as they really are.

With this understanding, upekkha refers to a disposition of the heart where it is clear of prejudicial feelings and likewise the mind clear of prejudicial thought. It demands those qualities we expect of judges at law. They advise juries and pass sentence without fear or favour, aversion or prejudice. You'll notice these are the same unwholesome roots of greed, aversion (hatred and fear) and delusion.

Equanimity arises more easily if we start our every sitting from the position of 'don't know' or 'not sure' and if we develop an attitude that wants to see things without prior perceptions, concepts and experience. It's like seeing things anew, for the first time, and is a necessary condition for a clear comprehension.

One way to establish equanimity is this: Take a standing position and place the attention on the soles of our feet. Discriminate between the sensations there – some will be temperature sensitive, others pressure – the elements of fire and earth. There will also be neutral areas. We will be aware of how they are constantly changing as the body rebalances itself.

Once the attention is steady on these sensations, scan the body from the feet up, feeling as many sensations as possible inside and on the surface of the body till we finally reach the scalp. Here, discriminate as we did with the soles of the feet.

Once the attention has scanned the scalp, throw it outwards and become aware of the outside. Keeping the eyes lowered, becoming aware of the colours and shapes, of sounds, of the atmosphere of the room, of the sense of other people.

When this outer awareness is stabilised, bring into awareness the breath, the feet, the body and so on so that the distinction between inner and outer loses its sharpness. It's all one mass of sensations and feelings. At this point we are totally present to conditions as they are.

Relax into this present moment, wide awake.

Then remember that in this moment there is no need to achieve anything. When we are in achieving mode we try to do something now for a future result. But here we have already achieved – our moment-to-moment mindfulness. Remind ourselves that the present moment is always here, it's not going anywhere. There's no need to plan. Remind ourselves that in this passive mode of pure open receptiveness, there's no need to perform, to be someone, a personality.

Repeating: 'Abiding in the present moment, wide awake. Achieving nothing, going nowhere, being nobody.' And when this has been truly digested, just to stand right in the here and now.

Of course, we also live in the flowing present and we shall see the next intention rising. Time to sit. Being open like this we can see an intention as it arises. This gives us the time to decide whether it is wholesome or unwholesome. To act from this point puts us in charge of our lives rather than acting out of habit and compulsion. To take this practice of equanimity into our daily lives is a powerful practice. It becomes our default position.

In retreat, to start a sitting like this gives us a foundation. We can come back to it whenever we feel lost or overpowered by a mental state. It's all so simple!

Let me now just relax into this presenting moment, wide awake. Let me now just abide a while, fully aware.



50. Adhitthana: Determination

Determination, resolution – a resolute determination, a determined resolution or simply perseverance – this is adhitthana. However we phrase it, it is a devotion to the practice, a complete giving of oneself to the task in hand.

Now we may say to ourselves that we are devoted to the practice, but how easy it is to relax, to be lazy, to avoid that effort just when it is needed and then wake up at the end of the day feeling disappointed. We know full well that if we had stopped and determined to continue, the day would have lifted and we would not now be reproaching ourselves.

The fact is we need to constantly re-make our affirmation. It has to become habitual. The resolution has to have a life of its own. As soon as we slack, the resolution speaks itself.

When a person joins the monastic order, the time to be spent in robes is not determined. The ceremony does not ask the aspirant how long they mean to stay. Such determination to do something for so long can be undermining since we can over-determine or we can sit back and think it's enough to have made that public declaration.

It's the same with partnerships and especially marriages where a couple make a public commitment to live and love each other and then they leave thinking, well, that's that. Everything should be fine till death do us part. Perhaps these days few people would be so deluded but nevertheless if it should all break up, then that inevitable question will emerge: where did it all go wrong? There may be many reasons but I'd hazard that at some time the original vows were never reinforced and quietly slipped away.

Indeed, this holds for any area of our lives from the commitment to our job, a friend, even a hobby. It is when times get a little rough that we need especially to reflect on why we are doing what we are doing and then, presuming that it is right to carry on, make that determination.

When it comes to how long we make the determination for, it is wise to keep it manageable. Of course we are committed to a life of contemplation, meditation and good works. But that's a long time. Who knows what might happen? Even a year feels hard and a week not much better, so difficult is it to maintain that commitment to the spiritual life. So a lifetime commitment can feel depressingly impossible. But when we think of a day, just a day – that definitely feels manageable.

Now if, during the day, we find ourselves slacking or falling into lazy ways, then we stop and recall our purpose and again recommit ourselves. In this way we can build up the determination, the *adhithhana*, we need to follow the path. As with all habits, the more we develop it, the more it is instilled within us until it becomes second nature.

We need a phrase, a mantra, to help us do that. And a time of day when we make that resolution. To repeat it three times is also skilful. To drum it in as it were:

This day, just this day, I devote myself unreservedly to the practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





51. Concentration? Relax!

Concentrate – will you please concentrate! Concentrate on what you are doing! Stop fidgeting about and concentrate! We all have such phrases from childhood, from home or school or both, whizzing about the head every time we start to worry about our concentration. So whenever we think of concentrating, it is accompanied by a feeling of tension, unwilling work and negativity. We may have had a hard time concentrating as children, in which case we already start with the thought: ‘I can’t do this.’

In the *Abhidhamma, The Collection of Higher Teachings*, the word ekagata is used – eka meaning one or one way and gata going. In other words, the mind all going in one way. Perhaps we can conjure up the images of all the beings who people our mind, all walking in the same direction. It has the notion of focusing, think more of focusing a camera.

If you watch a golfer preparing for a swing or a footballer getting ready to take a penalty, the feeling about them is one of relaxing. Musicians and actors and other performers will often prepare themselves with relaxation exercises. The tensions they feel are tied up with achieving. So it can be for us. We are trying to achieve concentration. ‘Trying to achieve’ puts unnecessary energy and stress into the act. So when we think concentrate, think rather of calmly training a camera on an interesting object.

Concentration, then, is built up best by simply making that continuous effort to place the attention on the object. We need to be very patient with the mind. Sometimes the little doggie just won’t stop still. We have to pat it and gently talk it down. We just keep doing the practice and wait for the mind to settle.

I find it is always best to start with the body. Make sure the body is comfortable and relaxed. If there’s tension, say in the shoulders, tense them up and relax them. Deep breathing can also be very relaxing for the body. Since the body and mind are so intimately entwined, as the body relaxes it has the effect of relaxing the mind.

When the attention can remain more and more on the object, this is known as developing vitakka. It's likened to a bee flying towards a flower. The noting helps us to keep that bee going in the right direction. We can sometimes get that feeling of falling inward. Then hopefully the bee will land and suck on the nectar. This is called vicara. Even so there's lots more developing to do. If, for instance, a sound such as a cough or the click of door suddenly shakes us – it can sometimes feel like a shock – this is a good sign to the meditator that they are becoming one-pointed, but there is still more work to be done.

Finally, there is a true settling and here we feel very still and calm. Here another danger pops up. We love it like a hot bath after a cold mountain walk. We marinate in it. Great! But gone is our investigation, the intuitive intelligence has closed down and we have entered a 'heavenly realm'. Unfortunately we have entered with the desire to enjoy and so created within a thirst for such joys. It's fool's gold! Sometimes we can rest there intending to refresh ourselves, but then we must continue our vipassana – to see things as they really are. After all, it was just one of those ice-cream mental states.

So let's not worry about concentration. Relax. Take it easy. Just keep placing that attention on the object. Let the mind gather around that intention. Should we arrive at a heavenly place, what better time to investigate the process of breathing. Right there we can see beginning and ending and not-self!

So let's commit ourselves to this wonderful practice! Just one day, that's all. Just today. Complete devotion to moment-to-moment mindfulness.



52: Pick Yourself Up, Dust Yourself Off And Start All Over Again



Resilience – such an important quality. Children have it in abundance so long as the situation is not crushing. They fall over, hurt themselves, scream at the pain – and next minute it's as if nothing happened.

So it should be with our practice. No matter how many times we fall off the rails, we get back on and continue. It is part of the quality of resolution, *adhithhana*, one of the Perfections. And it is so much easier to do this if we stop striving in the wrong way, if we abandon all expectation, expect nothing. When success comes into the equation, note and acknowledge it clearly and wait for it to pass. If there's no success to go for, then there will be no failure. Our spiritual life is a process of trial and error. All our techniques are skilful means, little tricks to help stay on the straight and narrow.

There are times when we feel we are getting nowhere, when we feel we simply cannot stay present. The mind will wander, career madly. Slowly we yield and before we know it, hours spent in dreamland. A meditator once told me they spent six months of a six-month retreat planning a trip to South America – and never went. Sometimes we seem unable to summon up energy – so tired, exhausted – and we give in. Hours later we stumble out of bed as groggy as a drunk. We want so much to be mindful around food and we start with good intention only to find an empty plate in front of us, without a single recollection of how the food disappeared. The only proof of eating is a heavy stomach. We feel so depressed, but we manage to stay with it until that moment of weakness where we give in and go to sleep. We wake feeling even more depressed – and angry with ourselves. And so on. At times the whole of the meditation just doesn't seem to be going right. No matter how much we continue to put in effort we seem to be overcome by this hindrance or that. And of course, this is true in our daily life too.

This is when a true trainee manifests resilience. No matter how many times we fall, we get up again. Remember those two glamorous idols of the silver screen – Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. There they are, singing: 'Pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again.' And tap dancing at the

same time! Surely the sign of highly developed spiritual beings. Now if Fred and Ginger can do it, so can we!

So let's make that commitment never to abandon the Path, no matter how hard it may be. And it doesn't seem that hard if we keep our focus on just this day. That's enough. Tomorrow will take care of itself. Today no matter how many times I fall, I will pick myself up, dust myself off and start all over again.





53. Rejoice! We're on the Path

The story of the Bodhisatta Siddhartha Gotama begins in a distant previous rebirth where he met the Buddha Dipankara and made the vow to become a self-enlightened Buddha. From then on, birth after birth, he strove to develop those qualities, the Perfections, which he needed to fulfil that vow within one lifetime.

What was it that drove his quest?

When he finally took his last birth in Northern India, in a place saturated with religion, he still had to struggle. First he passed through the training of the absorptions, the jhanas. And when that failed, he undertook the difficult practice of mortifications meant to subdue the body and so liberate the mind. But this he found simply painful and led nowhere. Then despairing that there was a way, there came the inspiration from a moment in childhood when he was watching his father performing the Ploughing Ceremony. That childlike looking, that easy absorbed state of receptive watching that adults mistake for senseless gawping, was the memory that made him sit just that once more beneath a tree. And such were his Perfections, those qualities that take us to the Other Shore, the parami, that he was able to make a resolution either to find the answer to his quest or die.

We can conceive through the medium of time, deep time that began at some beginningless moment from which the Buddha Within began to come into being. Or we can bring that into the present moment and conceive rather through the medium of space, deep space. There is 'something' within us that, like the Buddha, seeks the end of suffering, the end of alienation or meaninglessness. The Buddha Within is seeking home. It secretly rejoices in having found the Path to that place of perfect contentment and joy.

Now that Path is not easy and the Buddha did not say it was easy. In fact, he warned us it was gradual. Our practice tends to centre on the difficulties, the hardships. The constant bombardment of the hindrances and the lack of any real maturity in the Spiritual Factors of Awakening can lead us into feeling it is always going to be an uphill struggle. So it is important to

stop occasionally and consider our good fortune, rest for a moment and congratulate ourselves on work completed.

Most of all we allow that lovely religious feeling of gratitude to arise within. Thankfulness for this Dhamma. Thankfulness for the sangha around us who support our practice. And we rejoice in our ability to be a support also to them.

We reflect on the Buddha's life – his Perfections and on the work he accomplished. We pause to reflect on our good fortune to have found the Path. We reflect on the good fortune of finding teachers and fellow meditators. Thankful for this opportunity to practice and progress. All this develops that warm underbelly of religious emotion that can so nurture our practice of vipassana. It can give us that sense of joy in hardship as when a mountaineer struggles towards the joy of victory that can only be realised at the peak.

So with that sense of being on a path leading to the summit of happiness, let us devote ourselves to this day of practice. Just this one day offered to moment-to-moment mindfulness.





**FURTHER
REFLECTIONS** 



54. Turning Inward The Stream Of Love And Compassion

When we practise pure vipassana, it may sometimes become a little too hardened. In fact, the vipassana-only path, or the direct path as the Buddha calls it (ekayano maggo), is also called the 'dry path'.

Now, that's fine so long as all the spiritual faculties are balanced. But often we veer towards too much detachment. So much so that when the body feels pain, for instance, we forget it is signalling that something is wrong. The vipassana meditator is so engrossed in seeing the Three Characteristics or the Four Primary Elements. The practice becomes so hard we begin to tighten up around it and make it even more miserable.

Love and compassion practice softens the detachment and loosens the tightness. How then should we practice metta-karuna?

Most often this practice is taught for the benefit all beings. Classically, we begin with ourselves, then move to a person who naturally warms the heart, to friends and family, to a neutral person and then out to all beings. But some may find it more skilful to begin first with someone who warms the heart or someone who has shown compassion towards us and then to turn that attitude towards ourselves. For this is what we need to learn most of all in a vipassana course: how to comfort ourselves, be a friend to ourselves and how to encourage ourselves.

The phrases we use can be anything that develops this attitude towards ourselves. 'May I be kind to myself, gentle to myself, sympathetic to myself and benevolent towards myself. May I forgive myself. May I be free of pain and suffering. May I be resolute, courageous and steadfast. May I be happy.' We can be as creative as we want, but we need to find that phrase which has a special or particular meaning for us. All we are trying to do is cultivate metta-karuna towards ourselves. Then we can offer this to others and all beings. For our purposes, I think it best not to include those people whom we have difficulties with and those who have difficulties with us, save perhaps in passing. For this can bring up negative feelings and undermine the very qualities we are trying develop. We can always do this towards the end of a course. So, in this way we bring calmness and softness to the heart.

We can practise it in many ways. Some of us like it to start a sitting, others to end a sitting, others both. Some like to give one whole sitting to metta. On one retreat where I was having a hard time I would practice metta in walking meditation and go sit in purgatory. I found this particularly powerful. It is a case of experimenting and, of course, every retreat is different.

The Buddha also points out that metta, loving-kindness, has the benefit of making us sleep better. So if we are having problems falling asleep at night, this practice brings to the mind a soft concentration and the heart into a gentle delight. To do this we need to keep it very simple. A phrase or two towards ourselves and to one or to others whom we have an easy, loving relationship with, though not romantic or erotic – that can take us somewhere else. This will, in turn, create the relaxation needed to ‘fall’ asleep.

So remembering that all these skilful means are meant only for one purpose: to establish Right Awareness. So let us devote this day to the practice of moment-to-moment mindfulness.





55. Honesty Is The Best Policy

It's a cliché and it's true – honesty's the best policy. Even when it gets you into trouble, it's always the best course of action. So honesty can be kind, but also painful.

In our practice, self-honesty is of utmost importance. We can so easily fool ourselves in so many ways. We can kid ourselves we're doing alright and then we can trick ourselves into believing we're not doing alright.

It is especially around the hindrances that brutal honesty is needed. Hurting our feelings? We must not worry about that. We must be clear to ourselves. Do we really need that drink, that snack? Or do we shy away from these questions because we really want to distract ourselves rather than do walking meditation. Do we say: 'I need to refresh the mind, so I'll have a cup of tea' – when in truth we want to avoid the aversion we feel to continued sitting. Or do we acknowledge these thoughts as indulgence and refuse to obey them?

And what of tiredness? Do we slink off to bed after breakfast, after lunch, after tea and convince ourselves that it must be tiredness, because we never normally feel this tired in daily life. Or are we uncertain about the genuineness of the dullness and lethargy so we give it the benefit of the doubt and call it 'need to rest' or 'powernap'? In the morning when the bell goes and we wake up sluggish, do we say to ourselves that we mustn't have slept well and should stay in bed? Or do we acknowledge these thoughts for what they truly are and refuse to give in to them?

And restlessness – that need to move. A walk is what we need and off we go. For we don't want to sit still with it, to feel its discomfort. Walking wears it off, we say, knowing full well it can also suppress and even excite it more.

Are we still like children, gladly confusing 'can't' with 'won't'? 'Can't' sleep because they want to stay up. 'Can't' go out because they want to play video games.

Being honest with ourselves can be humbling, humiliating even. But it is our only path.

How we enact our honest discernment depends on our personality type. If we tend to indulge ourselves, then be honest but firm, even brutal. We have to make ourselves do exactly what we don't want to do. Not in an aggressive way, mind, but in the way a good parent demands obedience of the child. Those of us who are already harsh – hard task masters – then our approach should be soft and cajoling. As a good parent might offer treats to a recalcitrant child. Of course, we tend to go from one extreme to another, so we have to vary approaches depending on whether we are harsh or indulgent with ourselves.

It is all part of coming to know ourselves and we cannot do this without being truthful with ourselves. So from time to time, we need to sit and listen to the interior dialogue. What are we saying to ourselves? Are we fully aware of the little voices saying 'need to sleep, need a drink, need a walk'? If we don't acknowledge these subliminal voices they have enormous power over us. Acknowledging them is not enough. We have to decide if they are wholesome or not. And there's more. We then have to act in way to undermine their power – by doing exactly what they don't want to do.

So we need to make truthfulness to ourselves a prime virtue for self-deception is at the root of our condition. And that's what vipassana is all about. To see things as they really are! So let's do just that. Just for today. One day, moment after moment, devoted to really seeing things as they really are.





56. You've Got To Laugh

We've got to laugh at ourselves – but perhaps 'laugh' is too strong a way of putting it. Making fun of ourselves can be cruel and we don't want that. So perhaps smile at ourselves is a better expression. We need to see the funny side because undermining self-judgment, both negative and positive, can stop us getting 'serious'.

Some jokes help us see the funny side of life, such as the doctor who said the operation was a success but the patient died. Or the man who fell off a tower block and was heard to say as he passed every floor: 'So far so good.' We laugh when we see a dog chasing its tail or a toddler persistently tumbling as it tries to walk.

I once saw what I still believe to be a remarkable thing. We normally think only humans are capable of playing with other species. I was standing by the office at Kanduboda Meditation Centre in Sri Lanka. To my right was a place where unwanted food was thrown, replenished every day. Crows and dogs jostled with each other for a place at it. And among them all was a puppy. A crow hopped up behind the puppy, who was lost in eating, and pecked its tail. The puppy turned and gave a squeaky bark. The crow hopped away. The pup began again to eat. The crow returned, pecked at the puppy's tail and the scenario replayed. Again, the puppy turned, barked and the crow hopped away. After a few such rude interruptions, the pup, fed up and hopefully fed, trotted off. I thought what a clever crow, now it has all the food to itself. But not at all. It hopped after the puppy, as if to say: 'Oh, come on! I was only joking.' Then it flew off, no doubt disappointed. That pup just had no sense of humour!

When we catch ourselves falling into the same old patterns – the over-sleep, the over-eat, the erotic and romantic tales, the indulgence in future plans and so on, rather than start all that self-reproaching and recrimination, why not smile? There we go again!

We can view our personality as an unruly child, always wanting its own way even though that leads to dissatisfaction of some sort. It just won't learn. I often call it by my lay name: 'There you go again, Pete! When will you ever

learn?’ It’s a skilful way to distance ourselves from our unskilful habits and take the position of benign teacher. For indeed, our practice should be leading us to be our own guides.

When Ananda asked the Buddha who would lead the order when he died, the Buddha answered that he should take the Dhamma as a lamp and be a lamp unto himself.

In the Chinese and Japanese traditions there is the great cosmic laugh upon the enlightenment. And what would make us laugh on full awakening? Surely it is the realisation that all this suffering we have born age upon age, every last drop of it, has been caused by ourselves. And worse, it’s all due to a mistake – well, if we can’t see the funny side of that when we are liberated...

When we relax the face entirely, we can feel the face brighten into a gentle smile – the smile of serene equanimity. From here we will see the sunny side of life. So with a smile on our faces, let us delve into the mystery of our being.

How better to develop a deeper understanding than by watching and experiencing fully whatever is offered to us. This we can do by patiently building up the habit of moment-to-moment mindfulness. Let’s commit ourselves to that today, just this one day.





57. Death, Where Is Thy Sting!

Death and Dying by Elizabeth Kübler Ross was the seminal work in studying dying. She worked with terminally ill patients and came to unravel the process into five distinct parts. Not that they ran sequentially, but more that one went through these stages over and over during the process of dying.

First comes denial – and in our practice we do this when we ignore anything. Our conditioning tells us to turn away as we sense something unpleasant is arising. We pretend it isn't there and thus compound our delusion. So we are preparing for our death whenever we openly accept what is arising within us and go towards it to investigate.

Then there is anger which comes once the truth of an illness pushes into consciousness. Should we be surprised by that? The Buddha points out that the two root conditions arising out of the deluded self is grasping-greed-acquisition and aversion-hatred-fear. Indeed fear is simply the other face of aversion. So as we deal with anger and fear in our practice, we also prepare ourselves for death.

When anger fails to shift the disease, the process of bargaining begins. We do deals with God and with the Devil. We seek magic potions. Do pujas. Visit healers – all aspects of false hope driven by fear, a pleading for mercy stoked by dread. How many times in our practice do we seek an easy way out? How many times do we fail to turn round and face the beasts within us and instead take a tablet? Or go for a walk. Any excuse for not doing the practice, anything to make things feel better. When we can truly sit still in the swirling storms, roast at the stake of our own burning and accept our kamma, then we are again preparing ourselves for the day of our death.

When amulets and blessings fail, what is left but depression and despair? Here dying meets existential reality. Death demands we give up everything, everything we have acquired with such hard labour, all the relationships that have brought such happiness, even our own very selves. We must make a complete renunciation. Is this not what our meditation is leading us to? To perceive impermanence means realising that there is 'nothing in this world

worth holding onto'. If we can develop this understanding before we die then as Dylan Thomas says, '... death shall have no dominion'.

So now when the dying can finally let go, they enter a state of acceptance, equanimity – a Factor of Enlightenment which is that open-hearted, clear-minded ability to receive. Again isn't this what we are developing in our practice?

So the deeper meaning of our work is to be found in death. Indeed it is to be found in the death of each moment. The self can only think in terms of opposites. Either we live on or we are annihilated. But the Buddha pointed to something more subtle – the Unnameable. Nibbana is beyond conventional conditioning. When we are mindful, fully aware, the Buddha tells us we are in the vicinity, in the presence of Nibbana.

So reflecting on the ultimate importance of our practice, we can raise that effort to establish a moment-to-moment mindfulness. All day. Just this day, mind. That's enough.





58. Homage To The Body

The Buddha said this human birth was the most advantageous for awakening. Here we have joy and woe and the intelligence to identify the escape from samsara, forever being reborn in a state of delusion. Other places or possible rebirth have only the mental body. Here that mind is saturated with heavy matter for the body and mind are like ‘milk in water’. For those of us who find such ideas incompatible with their own, remember that belief is not a necessary prerequisite for attaining liberation.

The fact remains that when we turn inward a once unknown world opens up. Our development has taken us to the point of objectifying the world outside the body. Although we have a relationship with that world of possessiveness, some of it is mine, some shared and lot is not mine. But we don’t say it is ‘me’. ‘Me’ refers to what I experience in the body or through the body. Before we came to vipassana, it probably never occurred to us that we could objectify the inner world as we have done the outer.

Just as this outer world has limitation (the walls of a room), so the ‘inner me’ has the special limitation of the body. A room has windows to let in the light and air, so the body has the senses. As a room has an atmosphere, so the body has an atmosphere (our emotional life). As a room has meaning (a waiting room, a concert hall), so the body is filled with inner dialogue. When we step up to that inner ‘observation post’, everything we experience becomes other. There is a distance, a space, between the observer and the observed. Making the inner world an object is an experience of not-self. For that is all the Buddha is saying: If it’s an object it cannot be the subject. This is the vantage point from which we can investigate and begin to understand how this psychophysical organism works.

But equally important we are at a place where even the sense of the observer can be questioned. For that observer feeling, the feeling and recognition that ‘I am observing, feeling and experiencing’, is also an object and therefore part of the delusion that distorts a true experience of beyond the ‘I am’. Turning our attention onto that feeling, onto that inner image objectifies it even more and opens the door to spiritual realisation.

But let's return to the body, the grosser feeling level where it all begins. It becomes clear that the body has a life of its own that we know nothing about. They tell us that carbon dioxide is replaced by oxygen in the lungs. Have we ever experienced this? Have we experienced white blood corpuscles being made in the marrow of our bones? Have we ever experienced a white corpuscle devouring bacteria? Do we know that is happening in the liver? Beginning such exploration may make us feel an alien bound within the body. It need not be a pleasant experience, this not-self business. But at least there is the satisfaction of know that whatever I am, I am not the body.

The body also acts like a sounding board for mental feeling – emotions, moods. It makes our feeling emotional life more obvious to us and so easier for us to investigate. It may be that these two energies will separate for you so you come to know the body is one form and the citta another form of energy.

So, turn into the body. Let your ear become a stethoscope, your inner eye a microscope. Let your inner sense of touch explore texture. A world within a world constantly presenting itself to us. So why not use this gift of the body to liberate ourselves from the delusion of self? Today! Now!





59. Samsara is Nibbana

Samsara is Nibbana – this saying in Mahayana points out that samsara is not a place but a relationship. Of course, there are realms and rebirthing from this realm to that but this is just the process of rebirth. The word samsara carries with it all the sufferings, the dukkha, that we associate with life. We have to remember, though, that the Buddha on awakening no longer found life suffering. Bodily aches and pains, yes, but even here there was no suffering. In other words, he had brought to an end that moment-to-moment rebirthing into unsatisfactoriness. Instead, the form of Siddhartha Gotama was simply arising and passing and was being used as a vehicle to express the Dhamma. There was no dukkha, no unsatisfactoriness. Samsara had become Nibbana.

So when we talk of samsara in a spiritual sense, we are referring to a relationship, one that arises out of the delusion of self and turns our lives into vales of tears, whirlwinds of pleasure, but which never can find a permanent resting place of contentment and happiness. Nibbana, then, is how an awakened person experiences this so-called samsara without the self, without the desire to seek happiness in the ephemeral world.

When we are on retreat, we can experience this ever-turning samsara, day-in day-out. The same old routine, up early, down to the meditation room, sit, then walking meditation, then sit, then breakfast – same old breakfast – then work period, then sit, then walk, then sit and so on till lunch (thank heavens that's a little different), then rest, then sit, then walk and so on and so on till sleep. Then we wake up and off we go again, yet again. Working with painful states of mind for extended periods to boot!

When I joined the order I went to live with my teacher in Birmingham for two years. Every morning we chanted together for half an hour. The same chant. It never changed. At first it was honeymoon! I loved the experience of living as a monastic and chanting was a little of the icing on the cake. Then after a while, as with all honeymoons, this sense began to wane. Things got repetitive and dull and soon I was asking – why don't we chant something different? Why don't we bring a guitar in or a band? I mean, let's make it

interesting. Luckily, I had enough training by then to see this was the old Mara seeking happiness in sensual pleasure. So I kept at it punctiliously. Then came this morning chant, the same as all the others, when something was remarkably different. I just chanted. There was no particular pleasure and no aversion to be indulged. There was just chanting. It was wonderful! Right there and then I had a taste of samsara as nibbana (small 'n').

So as always, we just do the practice. We expect nothing from it. We desire nothing from it. The wholesome habit of our routine keeps us at the job. We keep raising the interest to investigate this experience we are having now. We don't want it to be any other way. A choiceless awareness inspired with curiosity.

That's it. Just for today. One day at a time. Turning samsara into Nibbana. Let's devote ourselves to that.





60. The Dhamma Works In Mysterious Ways!

I dare say you've never heard a Buddhist monk talk about God working in mysterious ways. Well, of course, I'm not suggesting such a being exists, but mystery does. If we transplant awareness and intuitive intelligence, satipanya for God, then we come to see the process of liberation as quite mysterious and beyond our control.

This is a big problem for us. We think we are in control of vipassana, that if we get the right technique and do it perfectly, then Nibbana is bound to pop up. This attitude turns the technique into a mystique, a lucky charm, a 'powerful mantra' or worse. But a technique is only there to help us maintain mindfulness and cannot go beyond that.

Then we think we can do something about our unwholesome conditioning. But as soon as we do that we have formed a relationship with it which has as its underlying disposition that we don't want it. So there we are thinking we are going to do something about our depressions, anxieties, guilt and so on and all the time we are unwittingly fuelling our aversion. Or we half consciously decide that such things are not worth looking at and we ignore them. Again the underlying disposition will be aversion or fear.

Even with pleasant states, we either unwittingly indulge them by failing to resolve not to indulge or we see them as a danger. We may be 'consciously' observing them, but we are subtly pushing them away. There's that old fear again.

So every time the self tries to do something it compounds its own misery.

Worse, we then 'try' to have an insight. But the fact is, a spiritual insight is beyond our control. If it were even an iota under our control, we would all surely be liberated in no time at all.

When we understand – and it's an understanding that has to be driven home time and time again – that delusion is within the knowing, how we see things is deluded. This delusion hardens around the self, the feeling of 'me' and 'mine'. Since the self is *the* delusion and the knowing is *the* deluded, you

can see we are in one hell of a double bind. Which is why we have to opt out of this relationship to the self and let the knowing shine through.

And the Buddha is very clear how we can do that. He says just attend openly and open-heartedly to whatever arises and passes away within the field of awareness that draws our attention. Be completely open to whatever arises and all reactions to whatever arises and, of course, to raise that interest to see their true nature, the Three Characteristics of Existence. They are impermanent and impersonal.

Then it happens. The knowing is now free to begin to ‘see things as they really are’. Change takes place within the knowing – and we won’t know it. Then suddenly, there is a deeper ‘seeing’ of one of the Three Characteristics or we realise we are behaving differently from before. Sometimes we feel a change within us – what it is, we don’t know. Often, other people tell us.

We need to put faith in that within us which seeks liberation. The Buddha Within, the knowing, Buddha Nature – call it what you will – pursues its own liberation and will arrive more quickly if it can get the ‘meditator’ out of the way.

So let’s do that. Just one day. This day. Now. Let’s get out of the way. Let this mysterious process unfold. All we need do is to attend. What could be simpler?





61. Really Saying Thank You

Receiving a present can be difficult for us. We feel obliged to pay the person back or we feel unworthy or we can be suspicious of the person's motives. All this stops us from enjoying the present. We are unable to receive the gift fully.

The same may be true for our practice. A lovely, beautiful state of mind arises, a wash of peace or the gentle sprinkling of refreshing joy. It might be a soft love or gratitude that blossoms. It could be the hammock of contentment. It might be the stillness and silence of a sacred night.

What do we do? Is it such a rare occurrence that we think it must be Mara, the Evil One, trying to ensnare us in desire? Do we fear our reaction is the dread indulgence? Or do we feel unworthy? We haven't worked hard enough. We cannot allow ourselves to enjoy it. Are we confused? Can we enjoy something without indulgence? Is all enjoyment indulgence?

When such states arise within us that are not attached to any sensual or worldly pleasures such as dreams of fame, riches, power and romance, then it comes under the definition of wholesomeness. Indeed they are the products of a purifying heart. We must remind ourselves that the Hindrances of lust, aversion and so on are not being simply destroyed but transformed.

So when the heart fills with beatific states we must accept them as merit, punya. Punya is our reward for a hard day's work, our wages. What would we think if someone worked their socks off and then threw their wages away? So we must learn to receive these states as well-earned wages although it is perhaps more skilful to see them as gifts. For indeed we never know how much we have earned nor when the pay-packet will arrive. But for sure all of us once liberated will have our cup, each to our own size, brimming with contentment and happiness.

The danger, of course, is that we spoil the gift by indulging in it. How can we tell the difference between enjoying and indulging? Surely it is to be found in our attitude. As the state arises, receive it openly, wanting no more than it is giving. It came unbidden and will disappear of its own accord. Let

our attitude towards it be one of allowing it to express itself to us – as we might watch a little girl who wants to dance for us.

Now we could continue to practise insight. There's obviously no harm in that. We could indeed continue to investigate its characteristics. But it may also be a time to rest, a time to be with the experience. For often, even in a day, our investigative faculty, *panya*, needs time off. If we can stay with such an experience, enjoying, appreciating what it has to offer as it passes and sometimes before it passes, the desire to continue *vipassana* arises, refreshed.

In the meantime we have learnt how to receive a gift, to say thank you.

So let's hope – not expect – that our hearts will manifest the delights of our practice. They will naturally arise when we give ourselves to our just-for-today practice.





62. Is Anything Not In A Process Of Change?

The Buddha means ‘the One Who Knows’. ‘Something’ in us knows. An intuitive intelligence that has the power to understand things as they really are, but is incapable of doing so. The mists of delusion cloud its vision. Vipassana’s purpose is to dispel those mists.

But this quality needs to be primed. As the kerosene stoves had to be cleaned and primed before they would burn properly, so too with this intuitive intelligence, *panya*. The Buddha asked us to do this by becoming aware of the Three Characteristics of Existence. All compounded things arise and pass away, they have no substance and if we attach to anything some form of suffering will arise. These characteristics, he taught, are universal to all sentient beings.

It is good practice to reflect on them every day of our lives and especially so when we are on retreat. Here we shall consider the quality of impermanence, *anicca*.

Is anything of this world that we have seen, heard, smelt, tasted or touched without the quality of change? Everything is in process. Nothing is permanent. As we say, variety is the spice of life.

But that’s only when we see the arising of things, the ever-new. In fact, for us the new is good: new fashion, new pop star, new job, new relationship and so on. Newness carries the idea of freshness, brightness and with it excitement. We want life to change. This sort of change is welcomed. When the philosopher in us gets hold of it, suddenly we are convinced of eternal arising, everlasting existence and the meaningfulness of life.

But when we begin instead to focus more on the ending of things, the cessation, the disappearance, life is not so enticing. End of the day. End of the year. End of life. Yes, death –not so pleasant at all. And the philosopher in us that sees all things must end can only argue for annihilation and the meaninglessness of life.

The Buddha insists he taught neither of these two extreme understandings, but that all things are arising and passing away in dependence on something else. If we look closely enough, we see that there isn't actually any 'thing' arising or passing away. It's just continual change of prevailing conditions. Yet we won't be clear about this without keen investigation.

So when we sit, we need to prime our intelligence, raise curiosity and look with interest. Starting with the breath we get close and feel the process of the rising of the abdomen. Try to be there exactly when the sensation of the rising starts and to stay steady with the process of sensation till the in-breath comes to a stop. Then again hold that attention and feel the first sensations of the abdomen falling and stay with those till the very last. During the pause (if there is one) till the next in-breath starts, stay steady on that spot feeling, the delicate neutral sensations rising and passing away right there, and catch the first sensations of the rising again.

In this way we become more and more aware of the quality of impermanence, of process, of radical change. And it's not good enough to prime ourselves at the beginning of a course, or at the beginning of the day, but at any time we feel our attention has become flabby. Stop. Contemplate the quality of anicca and plunge once more into the vipassana.

This is our task. It should be calm and fascinating. Our meditation should be fuelled by the quality of wonder. So let's devote ourselves to that. To a day devoted to clear, calm, interesting investigation of phenomena. Just for today. A complete dedication.





63. We Have Contact

The Four Great Elements with their metaphorical names earth, water, fire and wind point to the four ways in which the senses ‘touch’ or are ‘touched’ by the world – the point of contact. Contact is the sixth link in Dependent Origination and comes when consciousness, a sense faculty and an object meet. So to see a bird there must be an awareness of the bird and that can only come into consciousness through the eye. This is contact at the level of the five senses. It points to the very basic stimuli upon which the mind works to create a whole picture. If you have seen a picture which shows you the eye movements made by someone viewing it, you will see the eye darts about, picking up pixels, unbeknown to the viewer. The mind is that quick in creating a whole canvas and solidifying it into an external experience. It’s magic.

But for the meditator this is another way to experience impermanence and not-self. We may be able to deconstruct the process of hearing which really does begin with waves of air pressure (earth element) knocking against the ear drum. It is given a ‘sound’ – alarm – and then recognised as the ‘clock alarm’. It is then given an understanding – its function, what it is supposed to do. Only then does the ‘I’ appear and acknowledge that it’s time to get up.

Dependent Origination is not a theory, it is an experience to be had. We can make that point of contact something to explore. When doing walking meditation, we can distinguish the sensations of pressure from heat and cold (the fire element). We can distinguish these from the sensations of movement (the wind element). In the lifting especially, we may feel the sense of elasticity which can give also give a sense of lightness (water element or cohesion). Even in simple tasks we can bring attention to bear on the sensation of touch such as when opening a door. What elements make up the touching sensation that enables us to distinguish between wood, metal and plastic?

The mind also creates its own internal contacts through memory by way of images and sensations that belong to the senses. It is again possible to see an initial fuzzy object slowly develop into the face of a friend.

The deeper we see this point of contact, the more we see how ‘things’ are manufactured and how they become solid. The impermanence in the changing object is all too obvious. But all this is happening beyond our control which points to all being not-me, not-mine and not-a-self. The senses sense and the mind makes sense of it. When we look at something, we don’t have to try to see. The eye sees. We don’t have to renew our understanding because it simply arises out of perception and experiential memory. In daily life we have to engage with this process so it is difficult to see that it is not a ‘me’ who is seeing or who recognises what it is that is seen. Our involvement in the process disguises that it is just that, a process of which we are aware and now actively engaged in. Typing this piece on the computer – I type the thoughts and the words arise naturally. Once it is written I reflect and correct. Because ‘I’ am doing this, I presume it’s all me. But all these processes arise upon the intention. As soon as ‘I’ want to control the process, it grinds to a stop.

In meditation, because we are not so engaged we can see process more clearly and see it happen without ‘me’ directing it. At first this can be a little unnerving, but eventually we come to trust it. We do so when we realise that the body and mind are instruments that we have developed. The more we develop from wisdom the more they will play music. Otherwise we are moving towards cacophony.

Who wants cacophony when music is available? Right here, right now. Today.





64. Anatta: Not-self

The doctrine of anatta, not-self, is the most confusing of the Buddha's teachings. It seems to be counter-intuitive since the one thing I am certain of is this feeling I have of 'me'. But that certainty doesn't mean it is not a delusion. A lot of fear surrounds this doctrine because it seems to teach annihilation, which the Buddha expressly said he didn't.

The Buddha suggests two approaches we can use to get to grips with this subtle teaching, one concerning control and the other compoundedness. In his second discourse which he gave to his former five companions, he centres on the quality of control. A treasured definition of self is that it has control. But how much control do we have over the body? We can make it go left and right, but can we stop it falling ill, growing, dying? What about perception and feelings? Emotions and thoughts? How much control do we have over them. An eye-opener to a new meditator is exactly that lack of control. Indeed once liberated there is a certain control over the emotional and thought life, but it is going to arise dependent on conditions. The Arahant feels compassion when the need arises, for instance, but in the liberated heart there are no more negative, unwholesome states. The self likes to think it can do its own thing, in its own way, in its own time. But this psychophysical organism and the world simply don't work along our self's desires.

The final words of the Buddha capture the main thrust of his teachings: 'All compounded things arise and pass away.' Compounded here refers to every 'thing' being composed of parts and when we unravel it, we find nothing substantial – a bit like peeling the layers of an onion. What is more, every 'thing' arises in relationship to something else. Nothing in the phenomenal world, in the universe, exists on its own, has its own existence, apart from the universe. Everything is dependent on something else for its existence. In other words, it is compounded also by its relationships. Earth remains where it is because of its relationship to the sun. So the feeling and concept we have of 'me' which creates this singularity, this feeling of transcending the world, is the essential delusion. Of course, the fact that everything arises and passes away undermines the idea of 'continuous existence'. And yet things keep on appearing!

Vipassana is concerned with seeing these truths. We can do it in a momentary way or through process. Here we shall discuss the momentary way. By momentary, I mean deconstructing present experience into its components to see its compoundedness. The Buddha does this through the teaching of the Five Aggregates: physicality, perception, feeling, conditionings created by will and cognition.

When we observe the breath, the feelings are bodily, physical sensations, the notings are mental acts of perception. When we watch an emotion, say anxiety, there is a physical feeling, an emotional tone and thoughts arising because of them and the noting which is the act of cognising. So with emotions we can experience physicality, feeling (both physical and mental), perception, volitional conditioning (which here is the presenting mental state) and cognising. By separating out these elements we begin to experience the self as a 'composite'. The feeling of substance is removed yet everything continues to arise and pass away. It's not annihilation. The Buddha upon awakening did not disappear, nor did he turn into a mute blob. He turned into a compassionate teacher and trainer of the Path.

It's a fascinating investigation, but one tempered with apprehension. Who or what am I, if I'm not 'me'? That's what Zen would call a basic koan. In fact it's the koan used by Zen schools in Korea – Who am I? The investigation of 'self' leads to the loss of 'self'. This is a major gateway into Nibbana. So let's raise the courage of the intrepid explorer and find out who or what we really are. And why not start right now? Today!





65. Time Still: Time Flux

What is time? Does it exist or is it mind-made? Space seems more tangible. Objects and their relationships are distanced in space which we can measure. If there were no objects, would there still be space?

Time also is a measure – a measure of events. Objective time we all agree on: minutes, hours, days, years and so on. Science also has an idea of a time moment which seems to be ever decreasing the closer scientists inspect what is going on.

For the Buddha, the concept of impermanence – *anicca* – was radical. There is a moment of an event, a beginning, an arising, a moment of stasis, a falling and a disappearance – like a ball thrown into the air. Time, then, is more like a series of billiard balls. Each moment arises anew, immediately following on from the previous and flowing immediately towards but before the next. To see this, to catch the radical appearance and disappearance of a sensation, is to experience this non-continuity. When we take that to our experience of self moment to moment, we touch into the insubstantiality, the lack of solidity of the self. This can be experienced in any phenomena. And to see *anicca*, moment to moment, is also to grasp *anatta* – not-self.

Then, there is psychological time. Our time is inflamed and inflated here and there with emotional value. We remember an event from years ago more clearly than the tea we have just drunk, because it was painful or pleasurable, a shock or a delight. Our psychological time is a compendium of happenings we tie together to form our autobiography. Like all plots that have a beginning and a middle, they move irrevocably to an end. By noting and acknowledging these memories, by taking our attention away from them into the presenting emotion or mood, we allow that emotion or mood to exhaust itself. In this way, we drain history of emotional value, but do not forget the story or its lessons. By doing so our future history will no longer be driven by unresolved events from the past. Indeed, to drain the past of emotional content is to liberate ourselves from compulsive history making. So along with insights into *anicca* and *anatta* there comes insight into *dukkha*.

Our effort in vipassana is to keep bringing that attention into the present moment. We access that observation post where we experience ourselves as onlooker, the objective observer. Even though this is not the purest of insight states for there is still that feeling of a self, we are better off than the body-self, emotional-self and thought-self.

By continuously making that effort to be in the present moment, there comes that occasional fusion with the present moment and with it the disappearance of self, of the observer. There is just the looking, seeing, knowing – a place where psychological time stands still. We are in the ever-presenting moment. These are moments of acute clarity, of ‘seeing things as they really are’. They may not be cataclysmic life-turning events, but they are moments of truth. The more they come, the more there is a turning in the way the knowing understands the world. It is an un-selfconscious process for the most part. Then comes a sudden realisation and we really do see the true transient and insubstantial nature of time.

So we must persist in our search, keep raising that interest, that curiosity. A gentle persistence. Let’s devote ourselves to that. Just this day. One day at a time. A devotion to the practice of ‘in-the-present mindfulness’.





66. Dependent Origination

The main feature of the Buddha's teaching in trying to help us break through our delusion of self is to deconstruct our experience. This he does in present moment experience and he points to the Five Aggregates or the Six Sense Bases. In the procession in time he deconstructs our experience with the teaching of Dependent Origination.

I'll be as succinct as I can. We enter every moment in the delusion of self. We also enter every moment with our past conditioning. This colours consciousness, the way we see things, and the psychophysical organism with its senses is employed to service this view. We make 'contact' with present experience this way. These momentary experiences are felt as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral again dependent on past conditioning.

The conditioning with which we enter this moment has been passive until now when it reacts to this experience by way of attachment and greed, aversion and fear or by simply ignoring it. This reaction solidifies through identity. What was previously 'want'/'not want' now becomes 'I want!/I don't want!' This desire is then empowered and becomes an action of thought, word or deed which in turn develops the original conditioning. In this way we spiral into deeper and deeper suffering.

One aim of vipassana is to uncover this process and to see it is to see how we create suffering for ourselves. It is also to see the escape. To do this we have to experience the reaction of wanting/not wanting and to allow it to arise and pass away. By not identifying with those reactions we no longer reinforce unwholesome conditioning. Eventually unwholesome, unskillful conditioning – whatever it may be – diminishes and will eventually die away altogether. The fully liberated person no longer has such tendencies.

On retreat and in daily life, if we remain alert, we can easily see this process. First in the passive mode, we can be aware of how a room looks and feels as we enter. We can be aware of our feelings as someone approaches us or we them. We can be aware of how the weather is affecting our mood. It is catching the process at the outset, the start of an experience. When we do this

we can either investigate that mental state which is what we do on retreat or we can set it to one side as it were and remind ourselves to investigate it later and replace it with a right attitude or view.

The active mode, the mode of reaction, is harder to be with because it is so habitual. It simply hijacks us. But even so we must try. It demands a sharp yet spacious attentiveness. The more we come to know our habits the more we are prepared. Forewarned is fore-armed! Look out for it in such situations when irritation with someone arises or greed flares around food. Or we unwittingly indulge our mood of depression.

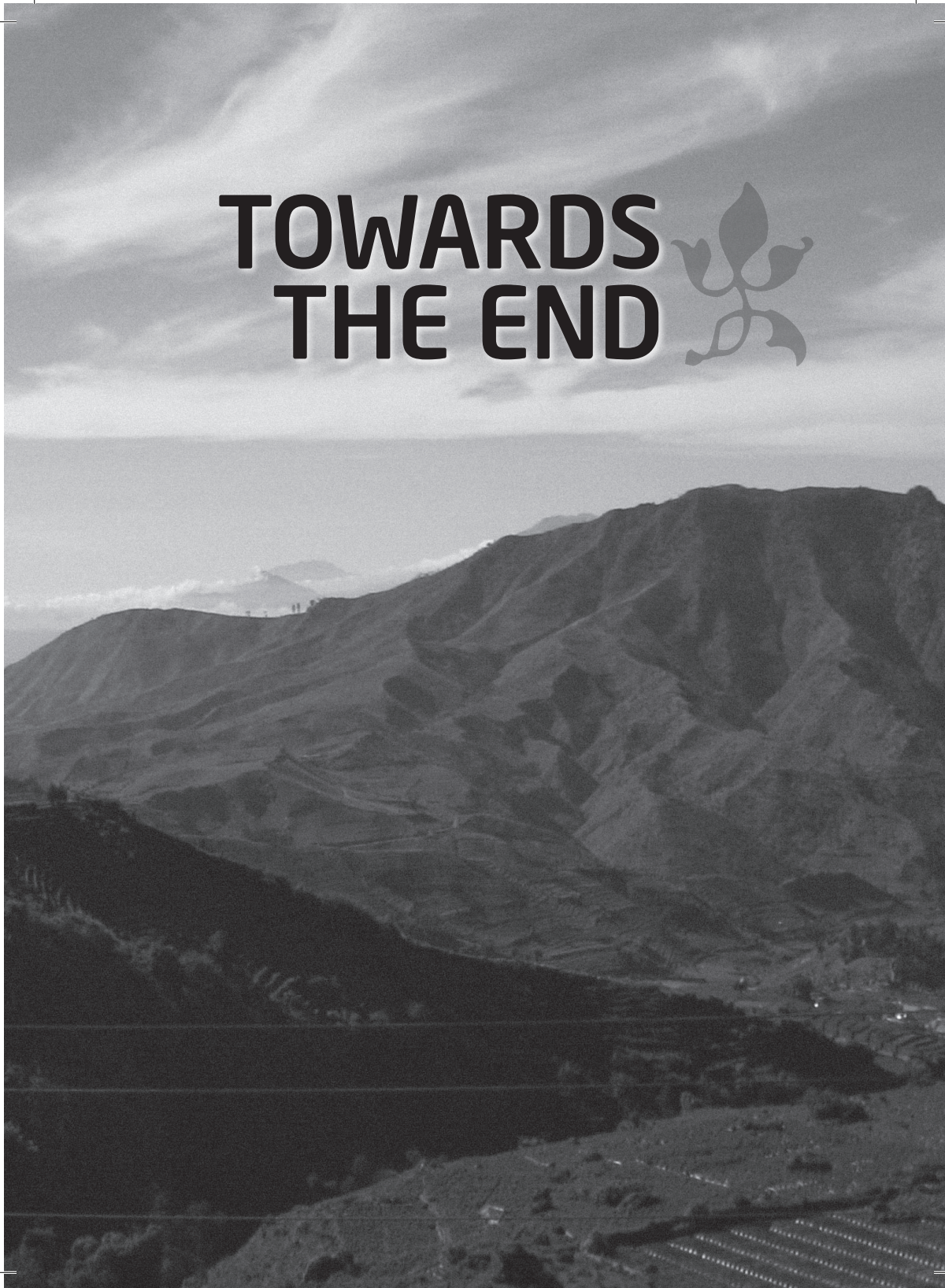
For instance, we may enter a room knowing someone we find difficult is there – even a teacher in a retreat interview. We feel a tightening. By putting that to the side, we engender an attitude of friendliness and openness to that person. Thus as we enter the room so too does a possibility of a fresh start. While we are with the person, we may feel the same old negative reactions rising, so we continue to set them aside and engender openness and kindness. Even if the relationship doesn't improve we will have done our own hearts a powerful amount of good by not indulging aversion. Later in the evening when we come to sit, we can recall the experience and deal with whatever left-over emotions there may be.

It's not an easy practice because it demands renouncing our desires. But it leads to contentment and happiness. Fair recompense, it seems to me. So let's devote ourselves to this practice. Just one day at a time. That's all.





TOWARDS THE END





67. Metta And Vipassana

Vipassana, being concerned with seeing things as they really are, generally involves focusing on the Three Characteristics of Existence: impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. A spinoff of this process of spiritual understanding is purification of the heart. For this to happen the quality of equanimity, the ability to be objective and calm, must be highly developed. The danger here is that such calm objectivity may turn into indifference. It becomes callous, draining empathy from the system. It is here that the practice of metta steps in.

Metta is re-establishing a relationship with oneself and the world. But instead of the former ‘what’s in for me?’ acquisitive relationship, what arises is one concerned with communication at all levels of human existence. This relationship is attitudinal and not based on transient emotional likes and dislikes, no matter how insistent. The late Ven Dr Vajiragnana, chief monk at the London Buddhist Vihara, expressed metta’s meaning clearly and elegantly: universal, unconditional love ‘is not an evanescent exhibition of emotion, but a sustained habitual mental attitude of service, goodwill and friendship that finds expression in deed, word and thought’.

Indeed, we could say that whatever spiritual understanding we develop is of little use if not translated into an attitude. Of course, these are the first two steps of the Eightfold Path – Right Understanding and Right Attitude. From these two, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood follow naturally. Furthermore this translation of understanding into attitude signals a transformation from negative unwholesome states into positive wholesome ones. The usual examples are connected with the Three Unwholesome Roots of greed, aversion and delusion, and we find selfishness is transformed into generosity, hatred into love and cruelty into compassion.

So we definitely have to end our retreat with some metta. How much depends on the length of the retreat. At a rough calculation an hour or two for every week you practice. But it can also be practised daily on retreat. Indeed some start or/and finish each sitting with a little metta. And you can do metta during walking meditation. We can play with it until we find our own

balance. The important thing is to remember that we're practising metta for the benefit of others.

There are many ways to develop metta, one is indicated below. Needless to say this is very much part of our spiritual portfolio and should accompany us into daily life. To quote from the *Metta Discourse*:

Let your thoughts of love go through the whole world with no ill-will and no hate.

Whether you are standing, walking, sitting or lying down,
So long as you are awake you should develop this mindfulness.

This, they say, is the noblest way to live.

And if you do not fall into bad ways, but live well and develop insight,

And are no longer attached to all the desires of the senses,

Then truly you will never need to be reborn in this world again.





68. Metta, the Development of Goodwill

First a few pointers.

Metta is all important since it is the basic relationship we develop towards all beings. (Even material things can be handled with care.) Basic because out of metta, compassion and joy arise naturally. As we wish to help a friend who falls into bad misfortune, or rejoice and wish their increase of joy when they enjoy good fortune, so we can develop this attitude towards all beings.

Metta, along with equanimity, compassion and joy, is one of the Brahmavihara, the Dwelling Place of the Highest Gods. In other words one of the most sublime mental states we can develop. These states are also known as the Illimitables since the limit of their development is indefinite. The heart can be as big as you want it or rather develop it.

Metta is love impartial. It does not matter whether we like the person or not. Because of this it develops into a love universal.

Whether our metta has an effect on those whom we direct it towards, is not relevant to the practice although it may do so. For the practice is essentially about developing an attitude which will manifest in the transactions of ordinary daily life.

And it is an attitude not an emotion. We are not doing it to feel good. That is why we can develop metta even when we feel down. Not that heart will not eventually resonate attitudes with delightful feelings, but they are to be received as one receives a gift.

Therefore we need to repeat such phrases as these with deliberate intention.

The traditional blessings can be whittled down to four:

May you be safe (from dangers outside and within ourselves)

May you be well (free from all sickness and disease).

May you be happy (free of all mental distress).

May you enjoy ease of living.

(May you live contented and in harmony with the world – alternative.)

The sequence of offering starts with :

our benefactors (with gratitude goodwill arises naturally)
those who are near and dear
friends and co-workers, whomever we wish
a neutral person (someone we see, but don't know)
towards myself
a difficult person
those around us
those in the neighbourhood (you can 'relocate' to where you live)
all in our country
all in our continent
all people on earth
all beings in all directions





69. The World Begins To Knock

I've always found the ending of a course interesting. For the few days and weeks before, sometimes months, we have been able to shut out the 'world', the outside. Or rather the outside has been limited to the immediate atmosphere and goings-on of the centre or monastery.

As we approach the conclusion of our retreat, this outside world begins to impinge strongly on us. It has surely intervened at times during our retreat, but now it begins to insist on being acknowledged and developed.

The planning really starts: What are we going to do? Who will we meet? The mind, so creative, spins off into delightful scenarios. But while we've been sitting here, as our inner world has changed and moved on, so too the outer world has changed and moved on.

So, for instance, the job we're planning to make a career out of is being axed. The friend we were going to go on holiday with is seriously ill or, worse, dead. The partner or spouse with whom we anticipated a joyous, succulent reunion has run off with the window cleaner or the barmaid! Who knows what other disasters might await us?

On the other hand, we may be worrying about our job and planning to get another one. The firm we are working for, meanwhile, is planning our promotion. Perhaps we are finally coming to a difficult decision to end a relationship because we see no solution while our partner or spouse has been moving towards reconciliation.

Of course, what we are planning may be in tune with the world. We can hope – but we'd be foolish to expect it.

Then there's the enthusiast who is planning how they will live in the now. How they will organise their lives around a six-hour meditation day and work for a living.

If we allow these fantasies to overwhelm us, we enter the world with preconceived ideas and try to manipulate the world to fit around them. We will most probably find ourselves in a state of conflict. Worse, in so doing we

may miss the opportunity to be creative. To be creative we need to clear the heart of attachments and desires so that as we enter the outside world, we are open to what it has to offer us and can respond in wise and creative ways, for our own benefit and for the benefit of others.

One frequent retreat experience is the vipassana romance. Suddenly the person of your dreams is right there meditating with you. Oh what dreams! Then the crash of reality upon meeting. We all have such tales to tell, not just in retreats, but also in our daily lives. A great benefit of this work is learning how to live a life not driven by self-serving desires or self-obsessed worries.

So let's spend this day as we mean to carry on for the rest of our lives. That constant effort to be present to ourselves. To catch the mind before it whirls us away. To attend to the heart before we are drowned in its floods. If we can make that effort today, we can do it tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. It's enough to devote ourselves to this day. So let's give our hearts to the practice.





70. Up, Down – But Not Out

Once we are settled meditators and we start counting up the hours we have sat and the efforts we have made in ordinary daily life, it is often the case that ‘progress’ is not all that obvious. We seem to keep making the same old mistakes, suffering the same old mental states, having the same old problems in meditation. For some this can become a real crisis and I know others who have left the practice because of it.

First, taking for granted that our understanding and basic practice on retreat and in daily life is skilful and correct, then it’s good to remind ourselves that the Buddha did not say this was easy or that we would quickly advance to liberation. He said the Path was gradual and that we had to put effort into it. His final words are appamadena sampadetha. Appamado is a favourite word of his, meaning diligence and devotion to the task. Sampadetha means to strive, to try to accomplish one’s aims. This last phrase is variously translated, but its meaning is ‘strive diligently for your own liberation’.

Second is the presumption itself of progress, so natural to the self. The self invariably wants more than it gets. We have to see disappointment as a measure of that expectation. But the Buddha didn’t say sit in order to achieve Nibbana. He said sit in order to establish Right Awareness. Live daily with Right Mindfulness and in the *Metta Sutta* he advises us to saturate this with unconditional love. We shall do this only when we really understand that the processes of insight and purification take care of themselves. We need to trust our own Buddha Nature, that intuitive awareness that manifests when we are in the mode of Right Awareness.

Third, there are the vipassana insights and the four levels of Noble Attainment. But the danger here is that they can become aims and that old achieving rascal, the self, takes over. It’s good to know there is a well-delineated Path, but it’s best then to put it on the back burner and have confidence that the practice will lead us along.

Fourth, things get harder as we progress until there is a breakthrough. When we bend a branch to break it in two, the closer it is to splitting, the greater is the pressure that has to be applied. Then snap! We have another

state. We have two sticks. This is how spiritual practice works. It gets harder the more we reach the breakthrough point, the point of transition and transformation. This is signified in the Great Doubt that beset the Buddha just before his own breakthrough when 'Mara' questioned the righteousness of his very effort. Once the storm had passed, the gate was opened wide. It is often right there, at the testing point that meditators tend to give up.

Fifth, like any task we undertake things will go well and then they go wrong. These are the ups and downs we find in all nature. We have to be careful it's not up, down and out. It is better to look back over the whole period of time since we started out on the Path of Dhamma and compare it to how it was before. Our progress may be more obvious than thinking about what have we gained in a week or three months on retreat.

Sixth, we do not live in a spiritually supportive society so when we leave the special conditions of a retreat, we invariably fall back. It really is a bit of an up-down-hill struggle. But hopefully the long-term trend is up. Better to be content with little, than discouraged by lack of a lot.

And finally, when we bring the most important question into the present moment, the only living one we actually have: 'Would I want to be alive now without Right Mindfulness?' As far as I am concerned, that beats all doubt, right here and now.



Pali words with diacritics

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| adhiṭṭhāna | resolute resolution |
| anattā | not-self |
| anicca | impermanence, transience, radical change |
| añjali | hands joined in front of heart centre |
| appamādo | diligent |
| ātāpi sampajañño satimā | energetically – enquiringly – with awareness |
| brahma-vihāra | dweeling place of the gods, the highest mental states |
| citta | heartmind |
| devadūta | messenger from the gods, |
| dhamma | teaching, law |
| dukkha | unsatisfactoriness, lack, suffering |
| ekaggatā | going one way, steadiness and focus of attention, concentration |
| ekāyano maggo | the direct path, one way path i.e. no jhana/absorption needed |
| mettā | goodwill, love, loving kindness |
| muditā | sympathetic, reciprocal joy (also for oneself) |
| ñāṇadassana yathābhūtaṃ | understand and see how things have come to be |
| nibbāna | nibbana, the consummation of spiritual practice |
| paññā | wisdom, intuitive intelligence |
| pāramī | perfections, the virtues needed to go to the 'other shore', nibbana |
| parinibbāna | total or final nibbana, state of an awakened one after death |
| pīti | the joy on interest, the joy of investigating |
| puñña | merit, wholesome consequences |
| sadhammika | a follower of the true law, a Buddhist |
| saṃsāra | onward going, rebirthing |
| saṃvega | urgency |

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| sati | awareness, mindfulness |
| sikkhāpada | training rules, precepts |
| sīla | morality, good conduct |
| tapos | strong energy |
| | commitment needed for mortification exercises |
| upekkhā | equanimity, impartiality, unperturbability |
| vedanā | feeling |
| vedānasu- vedanā-nupassī | to observe, contemplate feelings in (as) feelings |
| vicāra | second stage of concentration, the bee lands on the flower |
| vitakka | first stage of concentration, the bee flies around the flower |
| yoniso manasikāra | wise reflection |





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White Grit Minsterley Shropshire SY5 0JN

Tel: 0044 (0)1588 650752

info: manager@satipanya.org.uk

www.satipanya.org.uk

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